RAM MADHAV ON HUMANITARIAN ISLAM

NAVAL MUTINY AND THE WAR ON MEMORY BY PRAMOD KAPOOR

SUHEL SETH ON THE AGE OF LIVING VIRALLY

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THE HIJAB QUESTION

IS IT SHAH BANO 2.0?

THE TRUTH ABOUT MUSLIM WOMEN'S PROGRESS

THE CAMPUS FRONT OF FEAR

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ISSUE ON STANDS **MARCH 2022**

For business queries, contact: Arun Singh - Business Head
E-mail: arun.singh@fortuneindia.com; Mobile: 9818164448

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The vacuum created by the death of legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar may never be filled ('Listen to '*Aye Mere Watan Ke Logon*' in the silence of solitude', by MJ Akbar, February 21st, 2022). Lata was immensely gifted and so are all the many lyricists and music composers who did justice to her voice and singing capabilities over the past several decades. She has earned a place in the heart of every Indian. Hailed as the "nightingale of India", she will always remain the much-admired personality who silently worked hard and loved her nation. It was her heartfelt rendition of the song '*Aye mere watan ke logon*'—commemorating the sacrifices of the Indian soldiers in the 1962 war with China—that is said to have moved Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to tears. The song was performed on Republic Day of 1963 at the National Stadium in New Delhi. This glorious song, as well as '*Mere desh ki dharti*' from *Upkar* in 1967, has become a staple of every Republic Day celebration for years now. Lata will also always be remembered for lending her voice to the songs of many movies, in fact, aiding the success of a large number of them.

One notable case was *Guide*, in 1965. Such was the impact of Lata's voice that the film was as much hers as it was Dev Anand's and Waheeda Rehman's.

There are numerous other examples. With Lata's death, we have lost a legend. But her soulful voice continues to regale the audience through her more than 25,000 songs, which featured in Bollywood movies, along with those in different languages. Lata Mangeshkar will always live on through her melodious songs.

CK Subramaniam

COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
OPEN

BATTLE FOR PUNJAB

The large number of political parties in Punjab will make the Assembly election a complicated multi-cornered contest ('The State of Abandonment', February 21st, 2022). While Congress is backing Charanjit Singh Channi, AAP is fielding Bhagwant Mann. The entry of Amarinder Singh, former chief minister, who has formed a new party and has joined hands with BJP, will also have an impact on the election. With this mixture of political parties, votes may be divided haphazardly. The situation today on the ground is different from earlier days. It is all too difficult for any party to ensure a landslide victory. The results may end in a hung Assembly.

MY Shariff

SYMBOL OF PATRIARCHY

A college in Karnataka's Udupi district is at the centre of the *hijab* row ('Behind the Veil', February 21st, 2022). While the judiciary is testing the matter, politicisation of it is going on in full swing. The *purdah* system is a symbol of patriarchy, whether it is in Hinduism or in Islam. The *purdah* system is believed to be a major obstacle for the social development and equal rights of women. The practice is prevalent in both Hindu and Muslim religions. Unfortunately, there have been attempts to defend the system by quoting from religious texts, and even under the guise of the Constitution.

Tarun Patidar

A LEADING EXAMPLE

Women cricketers have started to excel, and the Indian team has produced very good performers over the years, and one name that stands out is that of Jhulan Goswami ('When My Brothers Played at Home, I Was the Ball Girl' by Boria Majumdar, February 21st, 2022). Goswami, along with all the other talented players in the team, is expected to bring many more victories. She is an example of how dreams can be achieved with hard work, practice and confidence.

Vasudevan

By S PRASANNARAJAN

WHAT THE HEADSCARF REVEALS

AS THE HEADSCARF girl polarised the conversation, I returned to *Snow*, my favourite novel by Orhan Pamuk. Elsewhere in this book of postponed redemptions and veiled subversions in a place caught between devotion and denial, there's a staging of the play 'My Fatherland or My Headscarf', in which a woman takes off her headscarf and burns it, an unsettling sight for both the republicans and the Islamists in the audience. "When the angry girl tore the scarf off her head, she was not just making a statement about people, nor about national dress; she was talking about our souls, because the scarf, the fez, the turban and the headdress were all symbols of the reactionary darkness in our souls, from which we should liberate ourselves and run to join the modern nations of the West. Although few could make out her words, everyone heard one taunt back very clearly: 'So why not take off everything and run to Europe stark naked?'"

In *Snow*, the poet Ka returns to the Turkish city of Kars, where multiple passions are at play: secular, republican, religious, rebellious, mystical and aesthetic. The poet is a diarist and a detective, a lover and a conversationalist, an intruder and a *flâneur*. Ka seeks answers in a desolate city of snowstorms where the visible leads him to buried mysteries, and the ones that concentrate his scarred mind most are the suicides of girls with headscarves. An act of defiance? Or of submission? Or of death assisted by newly resurgent fanatics and the permanent establishment of enforced secularism? It's a city where Kemal Atatürk's vision of enlightened secularism is the reigning religion, and where the republican ideal abhors the symbolism of enslaving faith such as a headscarf. The poet is lost in a maze of arguments, and even the pursuit of love can't save him.

The novel closes with the staging of another play, 'A Tragedy of Kars', in which the woman is faced with the decisions of a lifetime—"about baring her head and about committing suicide." The man, a republican, asks her why she wishes to kill herself. "The main reason for suicide, obviously, is pride. At least, that's why women kill themselves," she says, and clarifies: "A woman doesn't commit suicide because she's *lost* her pride; she does it to *show* her pride." When asked about the suicide of her friends, she tells him that "the moment of suicide is the time when they understand best how lonely it's to be a woman." The republican says that "here in Kars, there's no such thing as free choice." Women commit suicide "to escape all forms of punishment," says the woman who intends to kill herself. And the man declares, "I want my death to be at the hands of just such a woman." Before the curtain falls, there will be blood on the stage.

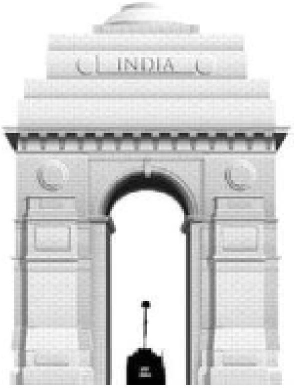
Snow, set in a place that is wary of storytellers, is mostly narrated by a writer called Orhan, who's in search of the lost poems of Ka. The one who seeks answers in *Snow* is bound to get trapped in new questions about freedom and faith in a country where the enforcer alone pretends to know all answers. The secularist and the Islamist, both fundamentalists in the true sense of the word, are pursuers of certainty, whether it's defined by the Book or the barracks. The headscarf girls have been condemned to live in someone else's argument. By suicide, did they become the sole arbiters of crime as well as punishment, freedom and pride? Answers are whirling beneath the scarf the actors wear in the play, still incomprehensible to the audience. In Pamuk's political novel, politics is what Stendhal says, which he also uses as an epigraph: "Politics in a literary work are a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, a crude affair though one impossible to ignore. We are about to speak of very ugly matters."

I returned to *Snow* at a time when very ugly matters were sanctified by faith and politics, and the headscarf revealed more than what it concealed. We heard the hecklers and haters, convenient secularists (different from pseudo-secularists) and outright zealots who are still struggling to come to terms with their inner Taliban in a Hindu India; we heard everyone except the headscarf girl herself. That's what happens when we are living outside a novel. When we are living in a country where the ghetto is a pre-requisite for the perpetuation of the 'minority conscience'. When the secular ideal is subordinated to the 'communal exceptionalism' of the victim. Is it what we may call the radicalisation of the secular mind? If religion is a forbidden wear on the campus, religionists must learn to resist their natural impulses, and some secular states play vigilantes to ensure that they do. Secularism is vulgar only when it is defended by those who are tainted by religion's worst instincts. Still, we don't know what the headscarf girl thinks, for some men have taken copyright over her thoughts. That's religion's worst crime.

In *Snow*, in the play within, punishment ceases to seek a crime that fits the script of the enforcers. In life, even in a constitutionally labelled secular country, there are no such resolutions as the story is still controlled by the enforcers. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor



IT MAY WELL be that those who make it their business to abuse the incumbent regime, with or without reason, very often without reason, attract the special attention of the investigating agencies. Point taken. But from that how does it follow that everyone under the lens of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) or the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is lily-white, strictly adhering to the letter, if not spirit, of the law? Unfortunately, if the ED raids and searches the professional critics of the Government, it is not quite unexpected, nor for that matter is the reaction of those raided: they all claim to be victims of an official vendetta. There being no smoke without fire, the truth is that these worthies seem to have persuaded themselves that the vicious opposition to the Government would by itself be a shield against their wrongdoing, and that they would get away without being found out by the prying eyes of the Government sleuths. Play it with a straight bat, Sir, and chances of getting out will get minimised considerably.

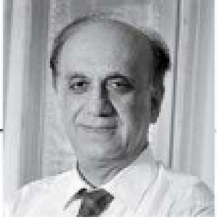
Take, for instance, this high-profile journalist who by dint of her high-decibel abuse of Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the time he was the Gujarat Chief Minister has parlayed for herself a global profile, exploiting the ingrained, and largely ill-founded, left-liberal bias of the Western media against the "pro-Hindu right wing" Government, as it loves to describe any regime not headed by Congress or its allies. When she established an NGO of her own and got into the business of collecting funds, ostensibly for the relief and rehabilitation of the alleged victims of the Modi Raj, the least she could do was to ensure that every penny was accounted for and used for the rightful purpose.

No. Our journalist had time to collect funds in the name of the victims of communal riots but showed no inclination to deploy them for the purported cause for which she got into the business of setting up and controlling an NGO. Though one would be careful to take what the agencies state with more than a pinch of salt, the lady had not a word to explain how over a crore of rupees had found its way into her father's personal account.

We, the good citizens of this country readily trusting her word, feel let down. She may not realise how she has let down the vast number of her admirers in the Western media. Indeed, if they bar their own journalists from running NGOs, why would they patronise someone who all through has violated basic rules of journalism? Time for another *BBC Hard Talk* to ask tough questions about those unspent crores in her NGO account?

TALKING OF NGOS, my old peeve against serving bureaucrats and working journalists actively associating themselves with such organisations does call into question their sense of fairness and independence. The business of such do-gooding tends to taint their professional credentials. Anyone with an axe to grind with a serving bureaucrat or a journalist associated closely with an NGO can always rely on 'a contribution for a good cause' in return for favourable treatment. Floating an NGO for helping oneself to a big piece of prime land at subsidised prices is an old trick. Politicians and journalists associated with NGOs are known to have exploited the failing of the people in power to disburse favours in the hope of buying influence. In the Vajpayee regime, too, a number of such charities were allotted prime land.

It is normal for those connected with an NGO to be paid for their services. Like Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his deputy Manish Sisodia, while running the Ford Foundation-funded NGO, were not really unpaid social workers. Kejriwal received a monthly stipend of ₹25,000. And Sisodia earmarked a room in his wife's Mayur Vihar flat as the NGO office to receive ₹15,000 towards rent. And the third active member who ran errands for the said NGO on receipt of a monthly salary is now an Aam Aadmi Party MLA, heading the party's Delhi unit. All through, Kejriwal was on a three-year 'study leave' from the Government, receiving full salary and perks. The short point is that the NGO route of social service is now tainted with selfishness and greed, though with some honourable exceptions. ■



Minhaz Merchant

India's Russian Roulette

A Beijing-Moscow axis can be destabilising

ON THE FACE of it, Ukraine has complicated the geopolitical courtship between Washington and New Delhi. Not quite.

The faceoff between Russia and the US-led West over Ukraine—the second largest republic in the former Soviet Union—will not lead to war. Despite 1,00,000 Russian soldiers massed along the Russia-Ukraine border and belligerent counter-mobilisation of troops and advanced weaponry by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), armed conflict is not an option for either Russia or the West.

US President Joe Biden has already ruled out "boots on the ground" to defend Ukraine. Economic sanctions are the West's only available tool. Russia has been under Western economic sanctions ever since it invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014. Sanctions haven't stopped Russia's economy growing. Nor have they slowed its burgeoning oil and gas exports.

> For India, which has kept a low profile over Ukraine, the key is to ensure that US sanctions under CAATSA do not hobble ties with the US following India's acquisition of Russia's S-400 air defence system

The opposite has happened. Sensing an opportunity, China—which treats Western sanctions with contempt—has stepped in to buy Russian oil and gas. By hamstringing Moscow, the US has helped establish a deeper China-Russia axis that could be a long-term geopolitical liability for the West.

Washington knows China represents the real threat to its leadership of the free world. In contrast, Russia despite its military strength, is a declining great power. Its economy, at $1.48 trillion, is less than half India's and a fraction of America's. China presents a threat of an immeasurably greater magnitude.

Christopher Wray, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), during a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, said the "threat from the Chinese government is more brazen and damaging than ever before."

Wray added: "When we tally up what we see in our investigations, over 2,000 of which are focused on the Chinese government trying to steal our information or technology, there's just no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, innovation and economic security than China." The FBI, Wray said, opens a new case to counter Chinese intelligence operations "every 12 hours or so".

Does Biden want to be distracted from this looming threat by Russia's adventurism in Eastern Europe? Biden has set out his priorities clearly: while the Ukraine crisis has to be dealt with in the short term with economic sanctions, not military action, China has to be dealt with through a decades-long strategy across economic, intelligence and security domains in partnership with a coalition of democracies.

Washington has pivoted to three key security theatres. The most important is the Indo-Pacific aimed squarely against China. Next in priority is the Middle East where the US recently designated Qatar as one of 18 non-NATO allies. Europe is the third security theatre for Washington. The US has long asked Europeans to take greater responsibility for their security over threats from Russia.

Ukraine is a flashpoint, but it doesn't change Washington's view of the world's future geopolitical architecture. Russia is a nuisance; China is an existential threat to a centuries-old Western world order.

For India, which has kept a low profile over Ukraine, the key is to ensure that US sanctions under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) do not hobble ties with the US following India's acquisition of Russia's S-400 air defence system. Washington is unlikely to apply CAATSA sanctions on India: it needs New Delhi as a long-term partner to counter China. That far outweighs concerns over the S-400.

For New Delhi, nearly two years into the standoff with China in eastern Ladakh, the India-US relationship is important. In a sense, India's political leadership is taking its cue from former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. Deng advised his country to "hide your strength, bide your time".

India's time hasn't come as yet but, as surely as day follows night, it will. Both Washington and New Delhi know this. Ukraine and Russia are distractions. They shouldn't be allowed to derail the India-US relationship which the application of CAATSA would do. The US Congress is much too experienced in Great Power politics to allow that.

India though can't be unprepared. A China-Russia-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey axis can be destabilising. India's historic ties with Russia will ensure Moscow acts as a buffer. Russian President Vladimir Putin knows the danger of allowing Islamist terrorism to gain traction.

In Russian roulette, there's only one bullet in a gun chamber of six. India must guard against that bullet as it negotiates the challenging geopolitical terrain that lies ahead. ■

GAME, SETH AND MATCH

Suhel Seth

Living Virally

The power of cough in a post-Covid society

WHO WOULD HAVE imagined that people would ask each other if they've had it or been tested or how was it? There is a new post-Covid lexicon. Even autocorrects don't bother correcting corona or Covid: that's how deep this whole viral business has become. But what it has also unleashed is the new world order of *living virally*.

Simply put, you no longer share photographs of the food you're having or the holiday you are on or, for that matter, some ugly wedding you've attended. You also now share your test reports, your vaccination certificates and your daily temperature. Such is life. Fear and amusement now co-exist. You almost have to hide under a rock if you sneeze or justify for hours that you have a smoker's cough and not one inspired by a Chinese virus. Health has become an intrusive domain. Everyone wants to know every minute detail. Covid has produced more medical experts than the advent of medical science, and what I find truly alarming is how they take themselves seriously, and how they are taken seriously. I must have proffered at least 17 types of remedies ranging from preventive care to helping you tide through Covid, and so on.

PEOPLE WITH MISTRESSES HAVE BEEN SUICIDAL SINCE THEY CAN'T LEAVE HOME AND PRETEND THAT THEY ARE ON TOUR. AFTER AEONS, PEOPLE HAVE FOUND OUT THE TRUE WORTH OF THEIR SPOUSES: YOU NEED TO BE ON AT LEAST FOUR ZOOM CALLS DAILY TO BE CONSIDERED WORTHY AND RELEVANT. ZOOM IS THE NEW MONTE CARLO

It must also be said that Covid has not just been a destroyer of health: it has also been a destructive force for those on holiday. There are internecine wars between the masked and unmasked. I know of a has-been actress, now settled in placid Goa, who has made it her life's mission to remain unvaccinated and people have (rightly so) gone into overdrive to ensure she's a social pariah. Then there's of course the whole army of people who would otherwise have been in Phuket, but are now marauding fine hotels in India. Having had Covid or not had it yet makes them feel immortal: they are adept at selfies on cliffs or with their faces almost falling into their finger bowls. Covid has made man feel vulnerable *and* immortal almost at the same time. Even death has been mocked.

We are no longer happy knowing someone who lived his or her full life is now dead at 96. The verbal post-mortem includes an assessment of their Covid history, and so on. Living virally has also been licentious in parts. I know of many rich louts who have used the pandemic to not just stop paying their staff but also getting rid of them.

It has also been a testing time for risk-takers. People with mistresses have been suicidal since they can't leave home and pretend that they are on tour. After aeons, people have found out the true worth of their spouses: you need to be on at least four Zoom calls daily to be considered worthy and relevant. Zoom is the new Monte Carlo. Many use backgrounds which are ostentatious even though they may be connecting from a hovel. Living virally has made us live virtually too. Many are scurrying to do up their homes since the Jones' have better homes than them. Folks who use bedsheets as tablecloths have now got to know the difference. Many are re-engaging with cutlery. And suddenly, the home is where the heart and guests are. Thanks to the stupid people running governments, the rules for dining out are so cumbersome that it's best to play ignorant and remain at home.

What has been the biggest revelation is the fact that we hardly have too many friends. Which, by the way, is a good thing. Social wastage is down like never before. The dipstick test is to see how many people you've been in touch with since the pandemic. This has helped people in myriad ways. The futility of having been in touch with so many people has now dawned on all of us. I guess we had more friends than we needed. Or perhaps we assumed all our acquaintances were our friends and, thankfully, that is not the case.

But then the single biggest contribution of the Chinese virus to global society has been the right of polite refusal. You can cry off from dinners by gently letting the host know that you've been nursing a cough and would not like to infect people. The host's reply, with alacrity, will tell you how really dispensable you are. And it's the same behavioural pattern in public places: if you don't want someone to invade your space, just develop a cough and see how far they run.

In some ways, Covid is now the new caste. ■

Suhel Seth is a marketing maven, actor, author and columnist

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OPENINGS

IN MEMORIAM

Scooter Man

RAHUL BAJAJ
(1938-2022)

GETTY IMAGES

THE LIFE OF Rahul Bajaj, who passed away at the age of 83, both parallels and is interwoven to the journey of independent India, from his antecedents to his own experiences to the legacy that he leaves behind. He came from blue blood, but it was one that had toiled for it, and not just in the commercial sphere. The family, with roots in Rajasthan, had a trading background but Jamnalal Bajaj, his grandfather, who turned it into a business group, was an important part of the freedom movement. He spent time in jail, was a follower of Gandhi, helming many of the issues that the Mahatma preached, from eradication of untouchability to promotion of Khadi to non-cooperation with the British. Rahul Bajaj's father Kamalnayan took charge after the passing away of Jamnalal Bajaj, steered the group through the upheaval of Independence while continuing to maintain links with Congress, even being a parliamentarian for them. Politics would never be very far away from Bajaj. The name Rahul was given by Jawaharlal Nehru, as he was wont to say.

Rahul Bajaj went to Harvard Business School and came back to join the family business in his mid-20s. It was at the age of 30 when he finally got control of the vehicle manufacturing unit that he came on his own. Bajaj Auto's eventual pre-eminence in two-wheelers was entirely his doing. The Chetak was the diamond in the crown. You couldn't have a decent marriage in that era without the scooter as a part of the dowry. Later in interviews, he would reminisce about the 10-year waiting period for an Indian to get his hands on one. And he put the blame for this squarely on the economic policies of a country where only the Government would decide how much each manufacturer could make. He wanted to churn out more scooters because of the demand, but was blocked at every step by the same party that his family had once been integral to. This might have something to do with his father backing the wrong team when Indira Gandhi split Congress and took over leadership. She didn't forget. Bajaj, who claims to never have given a rupee in bribe for the all-powerful licences that businessmen needed then, manufactured as much as he was allowed, but the scooters themselves became more and more coveted. You could buy one if you were lucky enough to get it, and the next day sell for double the price.

It was when the Janata Party came to power after the Emergency that he finally was allowed to expand manufacturing capacity. But soon, by the mid-1980s, the signs became increasingly clear that what was once a near monopoly was going to get serious competition. The Japanese, especially Honda, which led the global two-wheeler market, were knocking on the door. Bajaj eventually had a collaboration with Kawasaki but by then Honda had tied up with Hero, a cycle manufacturer, and was cornering a lot the two-wheeler market. Bajaj had to face the advent of motorcycles that were more sexy and had greater mileage (Hero Honda's catchline was "Fill it, Shut it, Forget it"). Then there were also scooters without gears. Bajaj, stubbornly even, refused to let go of the traditional scooter. It would only be in 2009 that his son, Rajiv Bajaj, despite his father's reluctance, would decide that scooters had no place in their ecosystem.

In the licence raj era, Bajaj manufactured as much as he was allowed, but the scooters themselves became more and more coveted. You could buy one if you were lucky enough to get one, and the next day sell for double the price

Bajaj's business didn't just survive but grew in liberalised India. He might have got late on the motorcycle game but soon was chasing Hero Honda. He never got to manufacturing cars despite making a serious effort, but in rapidly developing India, two-wheelers were enough for enormous scale. Once he handed over the reins, Bajaj stayed away and let his sons run their businesses without interference. Financial services were split off from Bajaj Auto for his younger son, Sanjiv, to lead, and it is now even bigger than the manufacturing wing. Last year, the market capitalisation of the Bajaj Group crossed $100 billion.

A major criticism Bajaj had to endure was in the immediate post-liberalisation period when he got a group of industrialists together to lobby the Government for more protectionist policies. The 'Bombay Group', as they were called, would become a term for entitled businessmen unwilling to compete. Bajaj believed he had strong reasons for the initiative—if it was Government policies over the decades that handicapped and strangled Indian businesses, then when the field was opening, they first needed leeway to become as efficient as the multinationals queuing up to enter India. As an example, there was his own attempt in 1987 to buy Ashok Leyland, the truck manufacturer whose promoters in the UK were selling their 39 per cent. A number of others competed and despite Bajaj's bid being the highest, the company went to the Hindujas, who were non-resident Indians. Bajaj believed the only reason for this was because, even though he had the funds in rupees, the Government didn't support him in raising foreign currency. In the section on Rahul Bajaj in Gita Piramal's book *Business Maharajas*, he remembered the experience bitterly: "I can't blame the seller. I can only question our government." The book also recounted what the Bombay Club did to his reputation: "The protest splattered Bajaj's whiter-than-white image with the hues of a protectionist. He argued in vain that he was not against reforms but the stain refused to wash out. 'The whole idea got completely ultofied [sic]. We want Indian companies to become multinational corporations and for that Indian firms need to grow... All we were saying was that the government should enable us to face competition.'"

His was a long life with one main focus—Bajaj Auto—but there were also numerous side explorations. For a while in the 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi made him chairman of Indian Airlines hoping to revamp it, but the morass proved too thick for him to clear. In 2006, he became a member of Rajya Sabha where his penchant for outspokenness was well served. Even after coming out of Parliament, there was no toning down. It is hard to think of any other businessman in India less afraid of consequences in speaking his mind to those in power. At an event hosted by *Economic Times* three years ago, he got up and told Home Minister Amit Shah that none of his other industrialist peers would say it openly, but they felt that the Government didn't take criticism well. There was then that other instance in the early 1990s when a telecom minister in the Congress Government called him and sought a dealership for someone. Bajaj asked that the person apply with the minister's reference. In an interview to Harvard Business School, Bajaj recounted the incident: "He (the minister) said, 'Sure, I will send him, but make him a dealer.' I didn't know what he meant, so I said, 'At Bajaj Auto, we deal on merit. I will give it to my marketing chief and tell him that, other things being equal, Mr So-and-So has recommended this case so we should give him preference, but if somebody else is better, then, you know…' He said, 'Mr Bajaj, do you know whom you are talking to, I am Minister of Telecommunications.' I said, 'Mr So-and-So, you can go to hell' and I put the phone down." ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

PORTRAIT • BAPPI LAHIRI (1952-2022)

DANCING TO HIS OWN TUNE

He composed memorable songs in forgettable movies but the remix revolution has kept his music alive

MITHUN CHAKRABORTY IN a silver suit with a matching headband, girls in hot pants playing the saxophone, side dancers aiming their guitars like guns. He's a swivelling dancer. '*Zindagi mera gaana, main isi ka deewana*/Life is my song, I am its lover,' he goes on.

That was *Disco Dancer* (1982), one of those B movies that has gone on to develop a committed fan base with its songs that are remixed from Los Angeles to London to Mumbai, from '*Auva auva koi yahan nache*' to '*Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy aaja aaja*'. The strobe lights, the glittery dresses, the John Travolta moves. It was our own Studio 54 moment, right up on big screen, so trashy that it was a treasure.

The man behind the songs? A portly gentleman with a pronounced Bengali accent, enough chains to embarrass a gold souk, and the ability to compose songs in seamless seconds. From Dr Dre to Cardi B ('*Kaliyon ka chaman*', *Jyoti*, 1981), from *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* ('*Tamma tamma loge*', *Thanedaar*, 1989) to *Ittefaq* ('*Raat baaki*', *Namak Halaal*, 1982), everyone loves a Bappi Lahiri remix. The movies were forgettable, but the songs acquired a life of their own. You could hear them anywhere and everywhere—in a fight scene with Adam Sandler and John Turturro in *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (2008), or the title of a 2021 Netflix thriller, *Raat Baaki Hai*.

Son of musicians, Bappi Lahiri's training was classical, and he famously started playing the *tabla* at the age of three. Think of him as the musical equivalent of Shammi Kapoor, his tunes leaping about and shimmying around, picturised on a set of imitators in the late '70s and '80s. To get a sense of the madness, all one has to do is to watch the wonder that is 'Nothing is Impossible'/'*kehta hoon mai sach bilkul*' from Tahir Hussain's *Zakhmee* (1975). The film itself, produced by Aamir Khan's father whom Lahiri called his Santa Claus, was a pale version of his brother's *Yaadon Ki Baaraat* (1973), but the sound of Kishore Kumar and Mohammed Rafi going wild, with the added bonus of Lahiri, is a masterpiece of cookiness. In an interview to *Film Companion*, Lahiri called it his "sixer" which transformed his career, followed by superhit songs from movies such as *Chalte Chalte* (1976, the memorable '*Kabhi alvida na kehna*') and *Aap Ki Khatir* (1977, '*Pyaara ek bangla ho*').

There were certain elements to Lahiri's music that made it relatable—the disco beats, the use of onomatopoeic words, the rhythmic engagement with the audience, and the simple words—'*Bambai se aaya mera dost, dost ko salaam karo*' (*Aap Ki Khatir*, 1977). He had the ability to add that extra zing to a song that elevated it from easy listening to earworm. Take the '*Ooh la la*' song from *The Dirty Picture* (2011), picturised on a frenetic Naseeruddin Shah and an uninhibited Vidya Balan. Or, the hypnotically bad rap by Amitabh Bachchan in '*Jahan chaar yaar*' (*Sharaabi*, 1984).

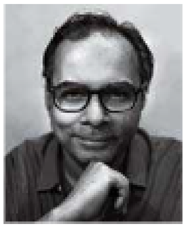
Certain elements of popular culture become campy, elevated from the ordinarily bad to the extraordinarily awful. Lahiri's music had the ability to be campy as well as sublime. There was a childlike curiosity about him, an enduring passion for the new. It came from his lineage—he was related to the Gangulys of Bollywood, specifically Kishore Kumar. It came from his love for global music trends. It came from his obsession with records. And it came from his boyhood worship of Elvis Presley.

Bappi*da* (born Alokesh Lahiri) was cool much before Bollywood was. He was the best part of some unwatchable movies. He was the sweetest bit of some terribly choreographed songs. He was a singer, composer, lover of music. He was a Bengali at heart, a Mumbaikar by work, and an international musician by taste. He was a man who made everyone dance to his exceptional tunes, from Amitabh Bachchan to Madhuri Dixit, from Rajesh Khanna to Reena Roy. The disco king was a true rock star. ■

By **KAVEREE BAMZAI**

ANGLE

THE CANADIAN COMPLEX



On the extraordinary power grab of Justin Trudeau to stop protests that would seem ordinary in India

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

THIS WAS CANADIAN Prime Minister Justin Trudeau when farmers in India were protesting: "The situation is concerning. We are all very worried about family and friends. We know that's a reality for many of you. Let me remind you, Canada will always be there to defend the rights of peaceful protestors. We believe in the process of dialogue." It is not a statement that has aged well. This is Trudeau this month tweeting of an agitation in his own country: "Canadians have the right to protest, to disagree with their government, and to make their voices heard. We'll always protect that right. But let's be clear: They don't have the right to blockade our economy, or our democracy, or our fellow citizens' daily lives. It has to stop."

A blockade, as any Indian will tell you, is the most natural extension to an agitation. The number of times all kinds of protestors, from caste groups to farmers, have laid siege on highways and railway tracks, are too many to count here. We even have invented a term for it—rail *roko*. But Canada, considered as an example of what a sweet liberal society is, now thinks that blocking roads is so dangerous that the government has imposed a national emergency. It now has draconian powers to contain an agitation that has seen very little violence. The Canadian deputy prime minister announced that they could now freeze bank accounts of those taking part in protests and that too without a court order. A citizen's hard earned money could be denied to him just like that. You expect this from tinpot dictators. But this is a country whose prime minister's main mission has been to project himself as the nicest politician in the world. Imagine the response if India were to impose an emergency because the road between Delhi and Mumbai was blocked. We don't do it. We negotiate with cunning or just send the police to clear the road brutally.

It is in the nature of politicians to use crisis as an opportunity for more power. Trudeau isn't different. The phenomenon underpinning it is the metamorphosis of the definition of liberalism—that corner that he and Canada think they occupy—to stand for exactly the opposite of what it once was. It was about the pre-eminence of the individual and his rights over the tyranny of government. Now, it is about the imposition of an ideology, whether by state policy or social coercion. The truckers' protest is for their right to conduct livelihood that vaccine mandates were preventing. Agitations don't gather momentum or find widespread participation without a tipping point having been breached. They blocked roads where much of the trade between the US and Canada flowed. When the government felt its pocket pinch, the instinctive response was an emergency. Earlier, they had been very okay when the losses were being suffered by the truckers. If you want to know why revolutions happen, this is why. ■

IDEAS

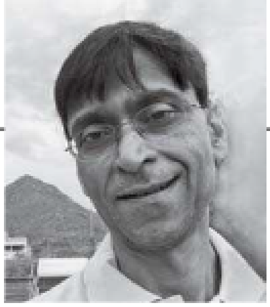
DEEPFAKE

When artificially generated videos, known as deepfakes, first exploded onto the internet a few years ago, there was understandably a fear of its misuse in disinformation campaigns and other forms of fraud and abuse. Those concerns remain. But as an example in South Korea shows, it can also be used for some fun and makeover. A leading candidate in South Korea's presidential election, Yoon Suk-yeol, has let loose a deepfake version of himself called "AI Yoon", who may look like him, but whose language is a lot saltier, and whose quips are meant to become viral memes. In the process, this technology has given this middle-aged career politician an unlikely quality—coolness. The character has reportedly become a huge hit with millions of youths heading to his website to interact with it. Expect a lot of politicians and strategists to be keeping an eye out for this. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Artificial Intelligence is the new electricity'

ANDREW NG,
AMERICAN COMPUTER SCIENTIST



Makarand R Paranjape

Love and Separation

The aesthetics of Indian politics XIII

COME VALENTINE'S DAY, the price of red roses in Delhi can go up to ₹500 for a single stem.

More culturally inclined Indian lovers, however, can beat this insane and extortionate hike by simple starting a week or so earlier, on Vasant Panchami, when the romantic drive and demand may be less fierce. For us, the rite of approaching spring is also tied up with the celebration of the arts—literature, music, dance, food and, of course, all forms of learning.

For the day is marked with the worship of the Goddess of learning, Sarasvati.

But whenever a day is reserved exclusively for love, there is a great deal of pressure to woo, or if already won, retain the favours of, one's beloved. But because all festivals are driven by commercial interests and considerations, consumerism is king, not the consumer. The latter may actually find himself or herself temporarily pauperised, with few benefits despite reckless extravagance.

Shakespeare called lust "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame." Any number of sitcoms have taken advantage of the foibles and follies of lovers in difficult situations. But "all's well that ends well," as the Bard put it, because, eventually, nature, with its overwhelming and unstoppable procreative urge, will have its way.

When it comes to politics, however, though *sringara* or romantic amour is the king of the *rasas*, politics and love rarely mix well.

Many political love stories end badly, partly because they are extra-marital. Even well-intentioned attempts to rectify the situation or course-correct can turn catastrophic. Few remember the unhappy story of Anuradha Bali and Chander Mohan. Sometime deputy chief minister of Haryana, the latter was better known as Congress state satrap and Chief Minister Bhajan Lal's son. In November 2008, Chander Mohan suddenly went AWOL. The reason? He was in love with the state's assistant advocate general, Anuradha Bali.

Chander Mohan's affair caused a sensation. After all, he was already married, with children. Missing from state cabinet meetings for weeks, he was defrocked from the deputy CM's post. He resurfaced with Bali on January 11th, 2009, declaring that they were married after converting to Islam. Their new monikers—Chand Mohammad and Fiza.

But Fiza's felicity was short-lived. In less than a month, Mohan went back to his first wife and family, also reverting to Hinduism. Three months later, on March 14th, he divorced Fiza. Fiza was discovered dead three-and-half years later at her Mohali residence under circumstances which could only be termed suspicious. She was 41.

Another political love story that didn't go right was that of NT Rama Rao (NTR) and Lakshmi Parvathi. NTR was not only the reigning superstar of Telugu cinema, but he also changed the destiny of the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh. Spearheading a new regional movement, he founded a new political outfit called the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in 1982. After thrice capturing power and being chief minister, NTR fell in love with Lakshmi Parvathi, a lady far younger than himself.

None other than his own son-in-law, N Chandrababu Naidu, pushed NTR out of power, splitting TDP. One reason NTR fell out of favour with voters was his infatuation, at the age of 70, for Lakshmi Parvathi, whom he went on to marry. After NTR's passing in 1996, Naidu took over the party. Lakshmi Parvathi faded away, despite her initial celebrity appeal at the hustings.

Quite the opposite, the incredible grit and spectacular political rise of J Jayalalithaa is the stuff legend—and now films—are made of. Amma, as she was fondly called, was a superstar in her own right. In a span of nearly two decades from the early sixties, when she made her cinematic debut, to the early eighties, when she transitioned from cinema to politics, Jaya acted in 140 films.

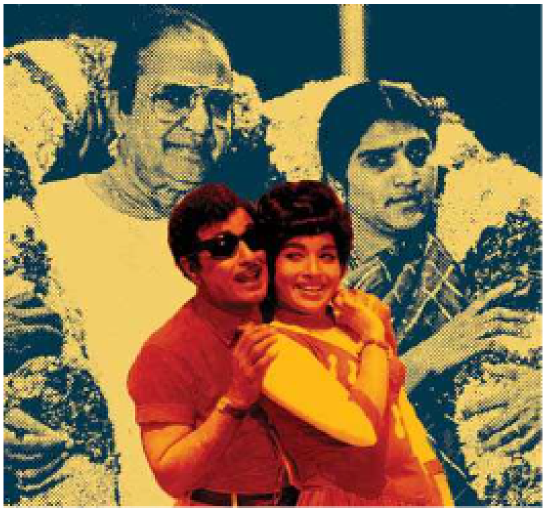
The most important man in her life was the great MG Ramachandran, aka MGR. Twice married earlier, MGR was wedded, the third time, to Janaki, while Jaya was 31 years younger than him. But despite their great age difference, the MGR-Jaya *jodi* was easily the hottest and most bankable in Tamil cinema, delivering 28 hits. The exact nature of their relationship remains somewhat of a mystery. In a no-holds barred interview with Simi Grewal, Jaya said that she always thought of MGR as protector, friend, and elder, rather than a romantic partner or lover.

That they cared for each other deeply was, however, never in doubt. During the heyday of their romance, the two were inseparable. In Vaasanthi's biography, *Amma: Jayalalithaa's Journey from Movie Star to Political Queen* (2016), Jaya recalls having had to shoot barefoot in the Thar desert. Her feet were burning. "I couldn't put a step forward and I was on the verge of collapse," she reminisced, "I never said a word, but MGR must have sensed my agony. He suddenly came from behind and swept me up in his arms." Despite MGR's chivalry and charisma, their on-screen and off-screen romance ended in a miserable break-up.

All because of politics. In fact, when it came to politics, Jaya had to make it on her own, constantly plagued by all the jealousy, backbiting, and horrendous slander of Kollywood czars, AIADMK leaders, and common cadres.

MGR died on December 24th, 1987, at the age of 70. Though she was repeatedly humiliated, prevented from seeing MGR during his illness, even pushed out of the funeral cortege, Jaya triumphed in the end. She not only went on to don MGR's mantle but took his legacy forward as Tamil Nadu's first woman chief minister. Till she herself passed away 29 years later, Jaya was an unstoppable force in the stormy, some would say ruthless, world of Tamil Nadu politics. Yet, she remained alone, both as a cine superstar and, later, as chief minister.

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



WHEN IT COMES TO POLITICS, THOUGH *SRINGARA* OR ROMANTIC AMOUR IS THE KING OF THE *RASAS*, POLITICS AND LOVE RARELY MIX WELL. MANY POLITICAL LOVE STORIES END BADLY, PARTLY BECAUSE THEY ARE EXTRA-MARITAL. EVEN WELL-INTENTIONED ATTEMPTS TO RECTIFY THE SITUATION OR COURSE-CORRECT CAN TURN CATASTROPHIC

What happens when the story of two film stars-turned-politicians itself becomes the subject of a biopic? Beyond just questions of the self-referentiality of the medium and its multiple messaging possibilities, especially in new, digital, OTT platforms, such cinematic renditions, even if they fail to qualify as aesthetic objects of high art, definitely raise their subjects to a level beyond just salacious gossip, rumourmongering, and tittle-tattle.

That is precisely what AL Vijay has done in *Thalaivii* (2021), based on Jaya's biography by Ajayan Bala. The biopic begins on a dramatic note. Like an avenging Draupadi, hair dishevelled and *sari* torn, Jaya stands on the steps of the Tamil Nadu Assembly to curse and challenge her DMK opponents and baiters, vowing to return only when she is the chief minister. For her feisty portrayal of Jaya, Hindi actor Kangana Ranaut got the national award.

But it is Arvind Swami's masterly and understated MGR that really leaves a mark, with an almost mesmerising resemblance to MGR, down to the last smile or mannerism. Raj Arjun as MGR loyalist RM Veerappan, and Nassar as Karunanidhi add to the film's histrionic appeal with creditable, albeit unidimensional, interpretations of their subjects. The film has its flaws, with background scores and songs poor substitutes for dialogue and action as the story lurches forward in leaps and bounds.

What is, however, fascinating is that while celluloid propelled actors and scriptwriters to political heights, their reverse portrayals in cinematic biopics have neither the same impact on the fortunes of film stars or films themselves. Biopics may be popular, but they have become so common that none of them can match the genre-defining, or should I say genre-defying, *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Welles.

In the end, however, political romances emphasise *viraha*, love in separation, rather than *sambhoga* or union. This is the keynote not only of reel life *Thalaivii*, or the real life MGR-Jaya romance, but of many others political love stories. Let us not forget that even our current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has always lived apart from his wife, Jashodaben. They were married way back in 1968, when she was 17 and he, 18.

Gulzar's *Aandhi* (1975), based loosely on Indira Gandhi's life and failed marriage, is another example. The sorry end of the Sunanda Pushkar-Shashi Tharoor romance and marriage also comes to mind. Sunanda's death, with its many unanswered questions and loose ends, will continue to haunt those who care.

Even the inimitable Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Rajkumari Kaul, though they managed their *ménage à trois* extremely well, never became man and wife. Mrs Kaul, who remained Vajpayee's primary companion and source of strength through all his political ups and downs, never enjoyed the status or the privileges of a prime minister's lawfully wedded spouse. Politics, it would seem, is a jealous mistress. She does not brook rivals.

From such a viewpoint, if there is any couple that is both politically and personally visible and successful, it must be Lalu Prasad and Rabri Devi. We don't exactly see them in a romantic light, but they not only attained the heights of political power in Bihar, the latter succeeding the former as chief minister, but are still very much conjoined after being together for so long and producing so many offspring, some of whom are political leaders in their own right. Not unexpectedly, their story has also inspired an OTT web series, *Maharani* (2021). ■

PLAYTIME WITH BORIA MAJUMDAR

The Call of Fantasy Sport

Beyond the big bucks, it is also about the pleasure of getting things right

FOR ALL THE issues surrounding it, I have enjoyed playing fantasy sport and continue to do so. It wouldn't be wrong to say fantasy sport or rather the investment in fantasy sport has even helped me know more about certain aspects of the sport that I wouldn't have normally invested in earlier. Associate nations' women's cricket is a prime example. In normal circumstances, I wouldn't really watch a Papua New Guinea or a Thailand trying to qualify for the ICC Women's World Cup. While playing fantasy cricket, I do. And by doing so, I have unearthed special stories that have left me in awe. The Thailand women's team's journey was one such.

First, let me make a very basic point. You don't play fantasy cricket for money. At least, I don't. Rather, most play fantasy sport for the love of the sport and from the standpoint of fan passion. To be more involved, have a kind of say in the game that was otherwise missing. If your fantasy captain wins the player of the match award, it leaves you with a sense of satisfaction. That you got it right and that you understand the sport well.

No amount of calculation, including mathematical formulas for predicting the optimal line-up for fantasy cricket contests, can come up with a perfect formula owing to the immense number of variables in cricket. Had it been the case, mathematicians and data coders would have won fantasy contests every single day. As Souvik Naha has argued, "There is much more to team selection than performance index and recent form. How does one enter factors like home advantage, players' familiarity with the playing ground, or the chance of rain overturning every estimate and forcing cricketers to do what they otherwise would not have? It takes a fair bit of knowledge-driven gut feeling to get most of these right day after day."

Naha goes on to say that he cringed when former cricketer Virender Sehwag asked fans to listen to their hearts when selecting fantasy teams in an advertisement. His signing off, saying "*Om Malamalay Namah* (May You Win Buckets of Cash)", was even more embarrassing.

Success in fantasy sport, I will argue, is based largely on research and knowledge. In fact, it also adds to the existing corpus of knowledge and helps in a better understanding of the sport. While many have now started to follow women's cricket in India, and will do so with the World Cup just weeks away, not many follow international women's cricket as closely as they do the men's game. This is where it starts to get interesting. In a match between India and Australia, for example, you need to know the Australian team as well to make the right calls in fantasy cricket. Will a potential fantasy player opt for Alyssa Healy as wicket-keeper using more number of points or will he or she go with Richa Ghosh from India? Will Meg Lanning, the Australian skipper, make a fantasy team or can young Shafali Varma be a better option? Is Deepti Sharma a better choice of all-rounder over the talented Ashleigh Gardner? Unless someone knows the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian team as well as he or she does of India, it is impossible to win a fantasy contest. Just as the players on the field do their

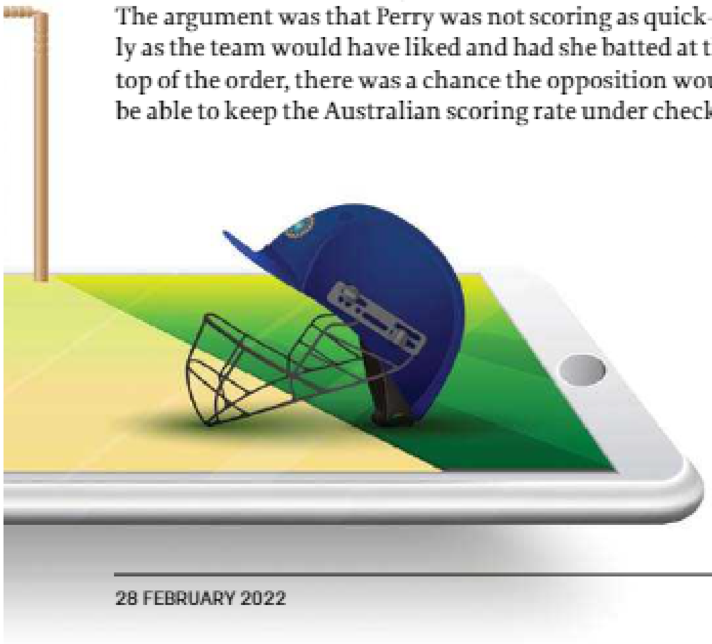
Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

research on the opponents and there are notes on every player they are likely to come up against, fantasy players maintain records of all players playing in a particular contest and their past performances against the team they are up against. Emotion or nationalism has little role in this and picking an India-heavy team against Australia in T20 women's cricket may well end up being counter-productive. Australia are not only the reigning world champions, they are by far the most accomplished women's team in the world at the moment in the T20 format. Fantasy teams, it is fair to say, should reflect the reality. Every Australia game means at least six players get picked from the world's best team and the number can often go up to seven, the maximum number permitted from a particular team in a fantasy contest.

This, however, changes when we come to the 50-over format. India is a far better team in the conventional ODI game and someone like Mithali Raj, for her amazing consistency, is a very good option to have as a batter. Smriti Mandhana is far more consistent than most others and can well be a captaincy candidate. And Jhulan Goswami, despite all else, is still a very good pick.

The other aspect I wish to draw attention to and something that plays a key role in impacting outcome in fantasy cricket is knowledge of team strategy. For example, Ellyse Perry, one of the best players in the women's game in the world, batted at No 7 for Australia on many occasions in the recent past. The argument was that Perry was not scoring as quickly as the team would have liked and had she batted at the top of the order, there was a chance the opposition would be able to keep the Australian scoring rate under check.

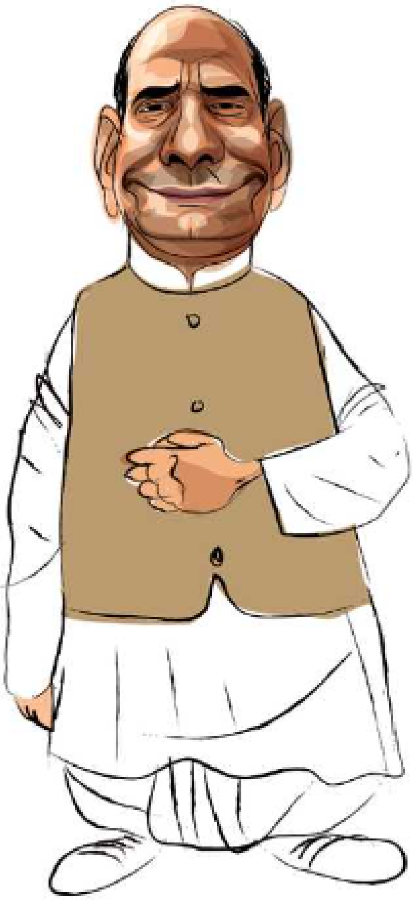
SUCCESS IN FANTASY SPORT IS BASED ON RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE. IN A MATCH BETWEEN INDIA AND AUSTRALIA, YOU NEED TO KNOW THE AUSTRALIAN TEAM AS WELL TO MAKE THE RIGHT CALLS IN FANTASY CRICKET. WILL A POTENTIAL FANTASY PLAYER OPT FOR ALYSSA HEALY AS WICKET-KEEPER OR WILL HE OR SHE GO WITH RICHA GHOSH FROM INDIA?



This was a case in point during the World T20 in 2018. Right through the World Cup, Perry hardly got a chance to bat. With the top order firing consistently, her utility in fantasy teams was limited. In the Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) that followed the World Cup, Perry opened the innings for the Sydney Sixers and ended up scoring 600-plus runs and was the leagues' highest scorer with two hundreds. While she was of limited value to teams in the World Cup and could be left out if need be, in WBBL Perry would inevitably be the first name on the fantasy team sheet. While Perry averaged a meagre 20 in the World Cup, she scored at a staggering average of 50-plus every innings in WBBL. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that both Perry and Australian captain Meg Lanning were support casts in the World Cup winning campaign but had assumed lead roles by the time WBBL had come about.

If Perry was something of a wrong investment during the World T20, Deandra Dottin from the West Indies was good value for every fantasy player. Dottin would star with both bat and ball and if anyone had followed the West Indies-South Africa series in September-October 2018 in the Caribbean, choosing her was a foregone conclusion. Dottin would open the innings with both bat and ball and that would give her the most opportunity to make an impact. Even if she failed with the bat, she would have every opportunity to deliver with the ball, making her a safe investment in fantasy cricket. Dottin, who plays a very similar role to that of Perry, was a better option during the World T20. The risk factor as far as Dottin was concerned was non-existent. While Perry is better known and more versatile, West Indian and Australian team strategy for the World T20 meant she was less important to fantasy players when compared to Dottin.

So while the debate on fantasy sport is ongoing and will be so at least in the foreseeable future, suffice to say there is a lot to it than meets the eye. Beyond the big bucks and the glamour, it is also about the little joys. The fan passion and the pleasure in getting things right. When your favourite batter scores a tonne or your favourite bowler picks a five-for, there is a sense of real joy that we all experience. No monies can match that and that element to fantasy sport is also something that we need to always take into account and talk about. ■



Who Will Be PRESIDENT?

With the presidential election round the corner, tongues have started to wag on the next first citizen. From the stable of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Defence Minister Rajnath Singh seems to be the first choice, and if the rumour holds true, he may accept the proposal if there is consensus and no opposition to his candidature—since there is a shortfall of BJP votes in Rajya Sabha and BJP has to rely on the support of regional parties to make the grade. Besides, if the outcome of the ongoing Uttar Pradesh (UP) Assembly polls reduces the number of Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) for BJP, it could spell trouble for the party. But with Singh as the choice for president, BJP may still approach the chiefs of YSR Congress and Trinamool Congress (TMC) since he shares a chemistry with them. Again, if the straws in the wind are to be believed, BJP might even part with the vice president's post in favour of its supporter. There is even talk that a woman could take that chair.

Opposition's Choice

OPPOSITION LEADERS ARE busy trying to put up a candidate for the president's election. There is room for one common candidate from the opposition if there is consensus. Now, who can that be? Telangana Rashtra Samithi's (TRS) K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) has taken the initiative and spoken to Rashtriya Janata Dal's (RJD) Tejashwi Yadav and Lalu Prasad, TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee and Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray. There is gossip that Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar may be a consensus candidate, with RJD proposing his name and BJP seconding it. But the question remains whether Nitish is willing to leave Patna.

Go Goa, Gone

THE SMALL SIZE of Goa is no guarantee for electoral success. Trinamool Congress realised this the hard way with its campaign in the coastal state ostensibly in tatters. Mamata Banerjee is clearly upset with her party's Goa action plan—which was reportedly mooted by political strategist Prashant Kishor, and accepted by Mamata's nephew Abhishek Banerjee. All this while Mamata was unaware of Goa's ground reality. Though she was not excited to go to Goa for campaigning, she went there thinking that since the state's former Congress Chief Minister Luizinho Faleiro signed up with her party that gave him a Rajya Sabha ticket, he would be fighting fit for the just concluded Assembly polls. But Faleiro sits pretty in the Upper House, as rumour has it that Congress leader P Chidambaram convinced him not to fight the election. With an apparently poor showing and no candidate for the chief minister's chair in the horizon, TMC is in a dilemma in Goa.

BACK TO FRONT

WHATEVER BE THE outcome of the UP Assembly election, the opposition is bound to be hyperactive over the next two years in the face of the 2024 General Election. The fissure, however, between Congress and the regional parties is stark. For Congress, the stakes in both Punjab and Goa are high as it fights incumbency in the former and seeks to take on the likes of the ruling BJP, TMC and the Aam Aadmi Party in the coastal state. But within Congress, there is growing talk that Sonia Gandhi may take the incremental step to rebuild a new UPA structure. With non-BJP, non-Congress chief ministers meeting in Delhi on the issue of a threat to federalism, senior Congress leaders feel the party should join the front too. They believe that Congress should start a fresh dialogue with Trinamool Congress, particularly if Prashant Kishor is not an obstacle. All eyes, meanwhile, are on the March 10th Assembly election results.

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

LEFT ALONE

FINALLY, THE COMMUNIST Party of India-Marxist (CPM) has admitted that West Bengal is impacted by dwindling party membership. The West Bengal CPM state conference is to be held from March 15th to 17th, and the party has prepared an organisational report for the event in which it has confessed that over the last four years, as many as 24,000 members dropped out. In Kerala, too, the CPM conference will take place shortly, and similar questions are being asked. How can the communists stir the new generation? How can the party change? After Sitaram Yechury, who could be the general secretary? Will it go back to Prakash Karat, or will there be a new face? It is time for introspection.

Foe Ground

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy and his sister and mother have not had the best of ties for long. The mother-sister duo even floated a new party in Telangana, and left Andhra politics altogether. But the story is far from over. The bitterness remains even as they now fight the KCR-led TRS. KCR, on the other hand, is learnt to be maintaining a cordial relationship with Jagan since their common political enemy is the Telugu Desam Party's N Chandrababu Naidu.

The Favourite

DELHI RECENTLY HOSTED Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav's daughter's reception. Apart from the BJP brass from Punjab, Haryana and Delhi, party workers could be seen from far-flung Odisha, West Bengal and even the southern states. Yadav has a massive following within the party.

US AND THEM

AFTER A LONG wait, the Government has come to know the name of the next US ambassador to India. He is none other than Eric Garcetti, the long-time mayor of Los Angeles and a renowned Democrat. In South Block, though, the gossip is that Garcetti is a strong advocate of human rights, which goes against the grain in Kashmir where terror is being tackled with a firm hand, at times to the chagrin of human rights activists who are known to cry wolf at the drop of a hat. This is where Delhi needs to do its homework before the ambassador makes his way to the city.

THE BIG DOUBTERS

WHEN RAHUL GANDHI visited Amritsar recently, five Congress MPs did not join him. They claimed they were busy campaigning for the Punjab Assembly polls. And now we hear that former Information & Broadcasting Minister Manish Tewari, also a known Congress face in Punjab, is both frustrated and alienated. Like former Law Minister Ashwani Kumar who recently quit Congress, Tewari, too, is learnt to be weighing his options to leave the party. And there is now speculation that former Congress heavyweight Ghulam Nabi Azad may float a new party with BJP support. All eyes are on Rahul Gandhi's next move.

Justice in Solitude

ALL POLITICAL PARTIES want a good rapport with the chief justice of India (CJI). Incumbent CJI NV Ramana is set to retire on August 26th. As per seniority, Justice UU Lalit will be the next chief justice, but for less than three months. After his tenure, Justice DY Chandrachud may succeed. The current CJI has maintained a life of seclusion as his job is very sensitive. During his stay, his 1 Krishna Menon Marg bungalow has never entertained any personal guest, and he uses the adjacent bungalow for his office and staff. He also avoided social dos and has a high security cordon around him. With the announcement of a new CJI, political parties are hoping to hobnob with the person before he too goes into a shell.

By RAM MADHAV

THE HUMANITARIANISM OF EASTERN ISLAM

Indian Muslims need to emulate the Indonesian model

WOKES ARE THE greatest enemy of classical liberalism. Their championing of the *hijab* cause is a great disservice to women of Islam who fought countless battles for centuries to unshackle themselves from the harsh Islamic patriarchal yoke. By deploying deceptive vocabulary like choice and freedom, and demonstrating false camaraderie with a few misled Muslim girls, wokes are actually pushing women back into the same orthodoxy that has been the bane of their lives.

But the opponents, who are taking to the streets against the *hijab*, are also not doing any great service. They are harming the larger cause by converting this essentially intra-religion battle into an unnecessary inter-religious war. Instead of leaving the discipline question to government authorities and encouraging voices from within the gender and community, they chose to pit saffron scarves against *hijab*s, not realising that such you-me dichotomy will only weaken the reformist endeavour within society in general, and Islam in particular.

After all, women of different civilisations and religions had to battle it out for dignity and equality in different periods in history. In Hinduism, continuous reform, aided by government and public leadership, has resulted in a marked improvement in the condition of women.

In Islam, too, such a battle against medieval orthodoxy is ongoing in different countries. A number of Islamic countries, with an exception to the ones like Iran and Afghanistan, have disallowed mandatory imposition of the *hijab*. Some Islamic liberals point out that the *hijab* in Islam was not about covering the head and body but about modesty in dress. But woke liberals insist that bikini and *burqa* are representative of a woman's choice.

Islamist orthodoxy, that makes the lives of women, minorities and non-believers miserable, is essentially a product of the Middle Eastern Wahhabi tradition. It is this regressive, puritanical and often violent version of Islam that has spread to India and other parts of South Asia, besides taking hold in several Arab and North African countries. It imposed medieval customs and spawned terrorism and violence in countries wherever it went.

In India, the Deobandi school largely favoured Wahhabism. Of late, the south Indian state of Kerala has emerged as the hotbed of radical Islam. Wahhabism came to Kerala along with the money that the immigrants brought, resulting in more and more madrassas and mosques preaching the fundamentalist version of Islam. Political movements like the Popular Front of India (PFI) and its affiliates like the SDPI are actively promoting this radical and patriarchal Islam. Medieval practices like chopping off the hands of people accused of imagined blasphemy, imposing head-to-toe *burqa* on Muslim girls and women, and promoting ill-devised activities like love jihad are all the result of this malice spreading fast in the state and the neighbourhood. These very forces were behind the recent *hijab* controversy in coastal Karnataka too.

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

INDONESIA'S ISLAM, WITH MINOR ABERRATIONS, REMAINS ESSENTIALLY JAVANESE AND SYNCRETIC. THE POLITICAL AND ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP HAS MADE SCRUPULOUS EFFORTS TO KEEP WAHHABISM AT ARM'S LENGTH AND NURTURED THE SUFI VERSION OF ISLAM WHICH IS TOLERANT, PLURALIST AND LIBERAL

Countering this medieval Wahhabi Islam should be an important obligation for the Muslim leadership in India. A new 'Look East' policy in religion may help in this endeavour.

While Middle Eastern Islam is struggling to get out of the stranglehold of the Wahhabi interpretation, a new movement for Eastern and humanitarian Islam is taking root in our eastern neighbourhood in Indonesia. That movement, led by the country's largest Muslim religious organisation known as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is worth noting and emulating for Indian Muslims.

With a population of 240 million, Indonesia is the world's largest Islamic country. Its Islam, with minor aberrations like the Aceh province, remained essentially Javanese and syncretic. Both the political and Islamic leadership in Indonesia has made scrupulous efforts to keep Wahhabism at arm's length and nurtured the Sufi version of Islam which is tolerant, pluralist and liberal. When the country declared independence in 1945, the constitution had called it a multi-religious and pluralistic nation with the motto: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (oneness amid diversity). Since then, NU has ensured that the shadow of medieval Islam did not come to influence Muslim behaviour in the country.

I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO meet with the NU leadership in 2018 when I was invited to speak at a conference hosted by them in Yogyakarta. I also had the opportunity to meet with Yahya Cholil Staquf, popularly known as Pak Yahya, the influential general secretary of NU. NU is a body with a membership of over 90 million Indonesian Muslims—that makes it the world's largest Muslim body. In my hour-long interaction, I was impressed with Pak Yahya's open-mindedness and reformist zeal.

Later that year, I was forwarded an article written by Pak Yahya in *The Daily Telegraph*, with the title 'How can we prevent another atrocity like the one in Christchurch?' The "Christchurch atrocity" that Pak Yahya referred to was the shooting incident that had taken place in Christchurch in New Zealand in March 2019 in which a Christian zealot had entered a mosque on a Friday and massacred more than 50 innocent Muslim worshippers.

Usually in such articles, it was expected that the author would harangue readers about Islamophobia and victimisation of Muslims in the Western world. But Pak Yahya's article was refreshingly different. In an introspective tone, he demurs that there is an urgent need to address the "problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie the Islamist worldview, fuelling violence on both sides. Jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy can be traced to specific tenets of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice… those portions of Shariah that promote Islamic supremacy, encourage enmity towards non-Muslims and require the establishment of a caliphate. It is these elements—still taught by most Sunni and Shia institutions—that constitute a summons to perpetual conflict," he concludes in the article.

Yahya Cholil Staquf (Pak Yahya)

> THE NAHDLATUL ULAMA HAS A POLICY OF REJECTING WAHHABI INFLUENCE. IT IS AGAINST STATE SUPPORT TO WAHHABI IDEOLOGY. IT DEMANDS MUSLIMS ACCEPT THE AUTHORITY OF THE NATION-STATE WHERE THEY LIVE AND GIVE UP DEMANDS FOR SPECIAL TREATMENT

Putting forth a rather courageous argument, Pak Yahya even cautions against the "weaponising of the term Islamophobia", and insists that "in reality, it is the spread of Islamist extremism and terror that primarily contributes to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world."

NU, under successive leaders in the last few years, has been spearheading campaigns to champion a version of Islam that promotes peace and pluralism. In 2016, it hosted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL). In 2017, it invited more than 300 international religious scholars to deliberate on the "obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law" which promote "perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam."

In the ISOMIL summit in 2016, NU had come out with a 'Declaration on Humanitarian Islam'. "If Muslims do not address the key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin… violence, anyone—at any time—may harness the orthodox teachings of Islam to defy what they claim to be the illegitimate laws and authority of an infidel state and butcher their fellow citizens, regardless of whether they live in the Islamic world or the West," it explicitly states.

What Islam needs today is *ijtihad*—a process of making legal decisions in Islamic law through independent reasoning. Wahhabi Islam is incapable of that as it is stuck in medieval interpretations of the religion. Its insistence on *Fiqh*—the medieval human understanding of the divine Islamic injunctions—results in situations that parts of India face today in the form of the *hijab* controversy. It is this archaic interpretation of the *Fiqh* that is responsible for the crisis in Muslim-non-Muslim relations, and the rise in orthodoxy and terrorism in the name of Islam. It is this understanding of Islam that promotes concepts like *al-ummat* and *al-khilafat*. This discrepancy can be addressed only through Eastern Islam represented by organisations like NU.

NU has a clear policy of rejection of many such Wahhabi influences. It is against state support to the Wahhabi ideology. It demands that Muslims accept the authority of the nation-state in which they live and give up demands for special treatment under Sharia laws or other customs of the past. "*Hubbul Wathan Minal Iman*/Patriotism is integral to the Islamic faith," is its policy. "Increasingly, Muslims' behaviour patterns reflect an obsession with the formal aspects of religion. This has led to the widespread phenomenon of outwardly religious people with corrupt souls," the declaration bemoans, hinting at the return of practices like the *hijab*.

"The Humanitarian Islam movement is dedicated to facilitating the emergence of societal consensus, among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to depoliticize the issue of Islam, and prevent the abuse of religion to promote sectarian hatred, supremacism and violence," the declaration concludes.

I heard the delightful news that NU has recently elected its most progressive leader Pak Yahya as its new chairman. Pak Yahya enjoys the support of the Indonesian government and President Joko Widodo.

Indonesia is going to host the G-20 Summit later this year, with India following up the next year. It is time the two countries joined hands as nations with the world's largest and second largest Muslim populations, respectively, to steadfastly promote the concept of the "Humanitarian Islam of the East" as against the Wahhabi Islam of the Middle East.

It is important to understand that while in battlefields swords will be met with swords, in the battlefield of religions, fundamentalist dogmas must be countered not with another kind of fundamentalism but progressive reform. NU in Indonesia shows the way for that reform. ■

Ram Madhav is a member of the National Executive of RSS and Member, Board of Governors, India Foundation

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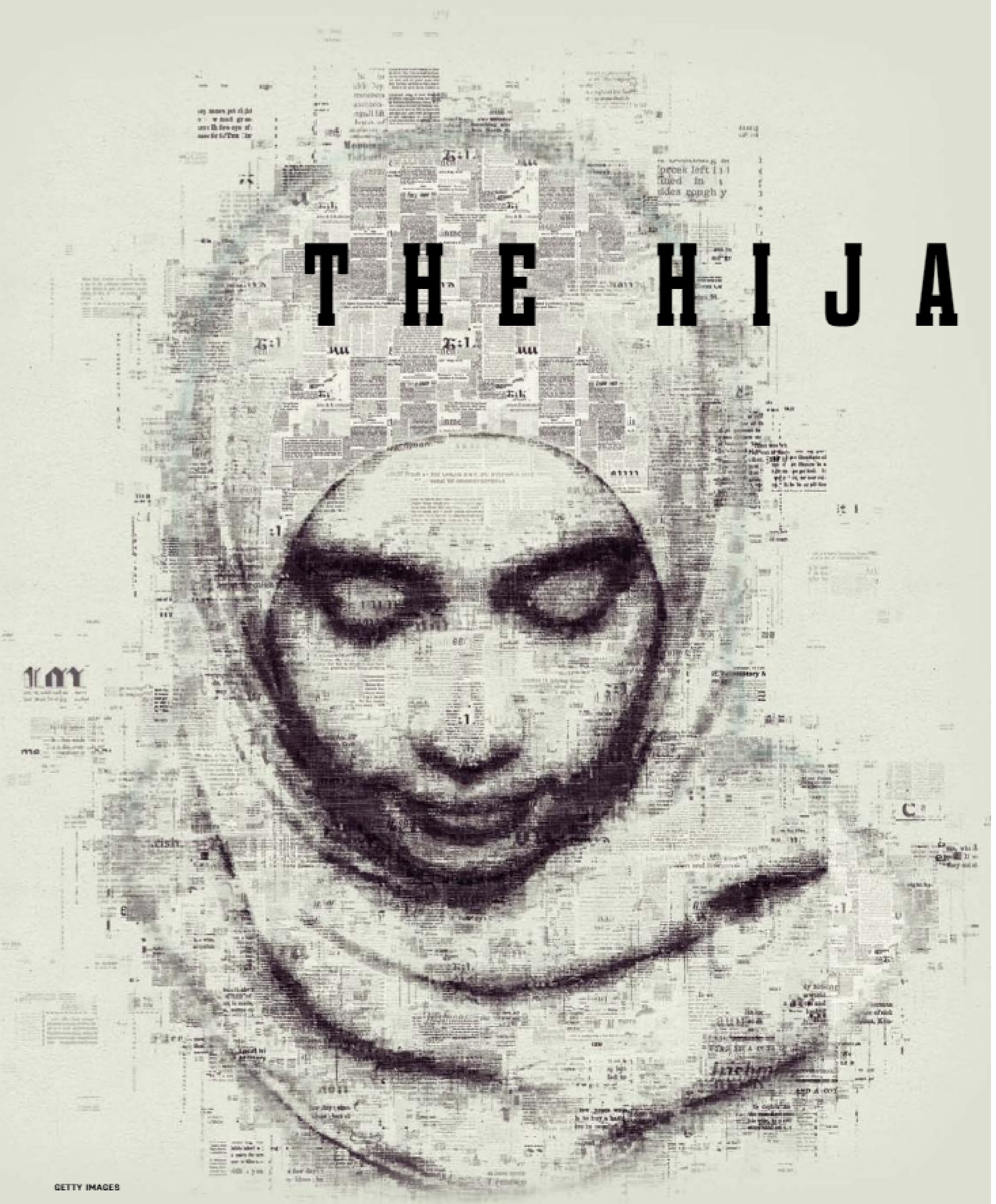
THE HIJA



GETTY IMAGES

B QUESTION

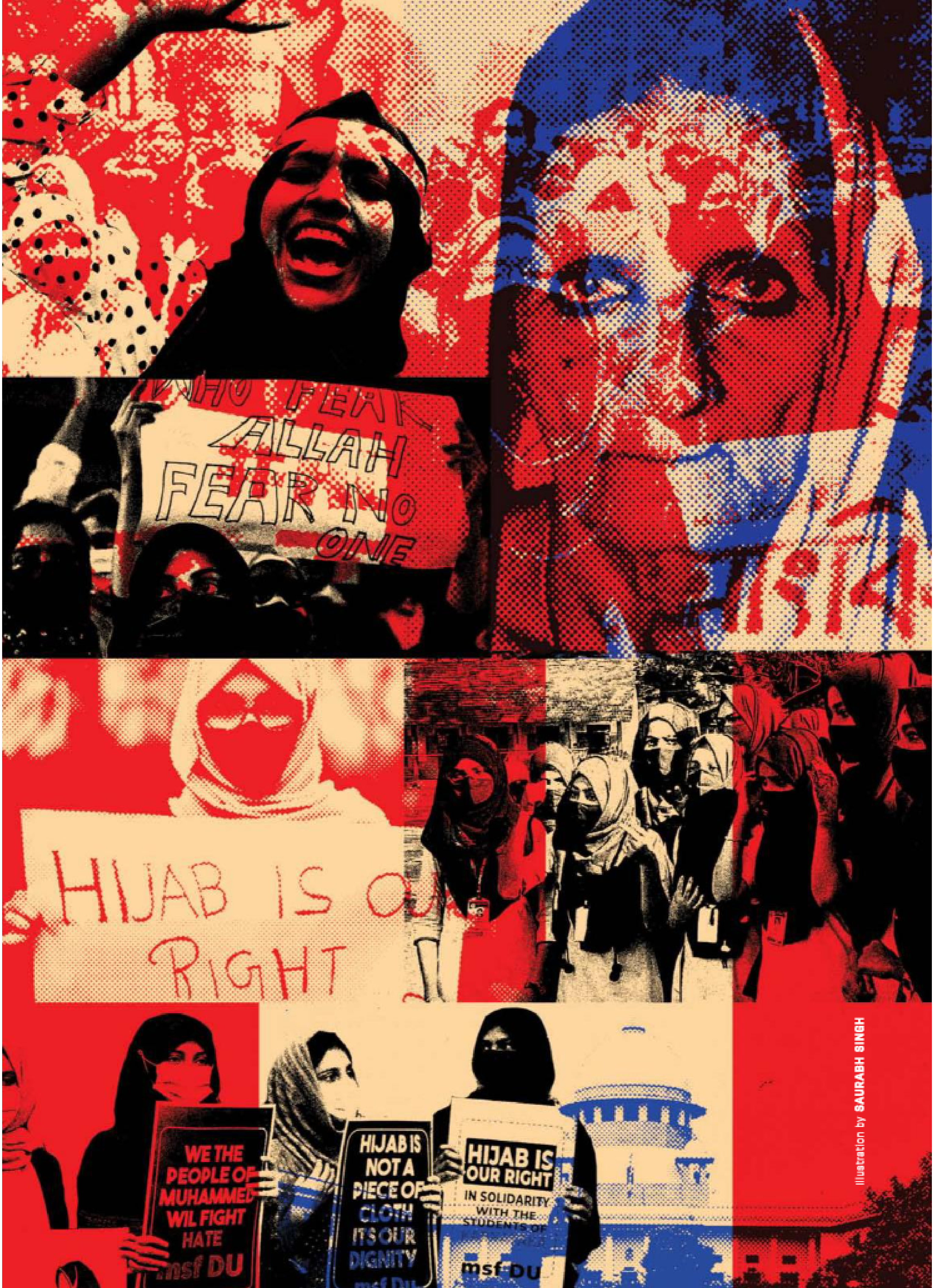
LATE LAST YEAR, TWO GIRLS WEARING THE *HIJAB* WERE DENIED ENTRY BY A GOVERNMENT COLLEGE IN UDUPI IN KARNATAKA. WHAT BEGAN AS THE INSTITUTION THROWING THE RULEBOOK AT A FEW STUDENTS HAS SNOWBALLED INTO A POLITICAL STORM. THE TROUBLE REPORTEDLY WAS BREWING FOR A WHILE. BUT THE CONTROVERSY HAS BROUGHT INTO FOCUS A NUMBER OF ISSUES: FIRST, THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF MAINSTREAM POLITICAL PARTIES LENDING SUPPORT TO A STUDENT OUTFIT ALLEGEDLY BEHIND THE ROW. SECOND, WHAT THE LAW SAYS ABOUT AN INSTITUTION'S RIGHT TO DETERMINE ITS DRESS CODE WITHIN BOUNDS OF THE CONSTITUTION. THIRD, THE IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSLIM GIRLS AND WOMEN WHO HAVE SEEN A REMARKABLE IMPROVEMENT IN THEIR ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND WELFARE IN RECENT YEARS, AIDED BY THE STATE. AN *OPEN* ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND LEGAL FALLOUT.

SHAH BANO 2.0

THE HIJAB CONTROVERSY CAN TAKE THE COUNTRY INTO DANGEROUS TERRITORY BUT, UNLIKE THE 1980s, IT WILL NOT TAKE PEOPLE YEARS TO GRASP ITS IMPORT

| By PR RAMESH |

India is currently experiencing its Shah Bano 2.0 moment, with the *hijab* controversy rearing its ugly head. That landmark case marked the beginning of the battle of Muslim women against Muslim Personal Law (MPL), when, in April 1978, 62-year-old Shah Bano filed a case in the civil court against her divorced husband and advocate from Indore, Mohammad Ahmed Khan—whom she had married in 1932 and had five children with—demanding maintenance from him under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC). The case was filed after Khan had asked her to move out, to a residence separate from that of his second wife and himself. Khan argued in court that he was only required to support Shah Bano and her children during the *iddat*, that is, the waiting period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or her divorce before she could marry another man. The length of the *iddat* is usually three months after either of the two instances. In case the woman is pregnant, the period extends to childbirth. Khan's argument was supported by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) which contended that courts could not take the liberty of interfering in matters laid out under MPL, adding that it would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HIJAB IS OUR RIGHT
IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE STUDENTS OF
msf DU

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

violate the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937. The board said that according to the Act, the courts were to make decisions on matters of divorce, maintenance and other family issues based on Shariat. The Supreme Court ruling in 1985 held that CrPC, 1973, which applies to all Indian citizens regardless of religion, could apply in this case. Upholding the decision of the high court, then Chief Justice of India (CJI) YV Chandrachud ordered maintenance to Shah Bano under CrPC, even hiking the sum from a paltry ₹185 per month. The case was considered a milestone, with the ruling emphasising the need for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and gender equality irrespective of the individual religion professed by an appellant. "The liability imposed by Section 125 to maintain close relatives who are indigent is founded upon the individual's obligation to the society to prevent vagrancy and destitution. That is the moral edict of the law and morality cannot be clubbed with religion," the CJI had held. What followed, though, was a shameful showcasing of political pusillanimity, minority appeasement and gross gender injustice, with the then Congress Government of Rajiv Gandhi overturning the ruling by passing a new law in Parliament called the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 which said that maintenance need be provided only during the *iddat* and if the woman could not support herself or her children, the Waqf Board had to provide for her and her children. Shah Bano's lawyer, Danial Latifi, challenged the validity of the Act but to no avail. Subsequently, Shah Bano withdrew her case. A momentous battle for the equality and dignity of Muslim women, especially in the case of marriage, was lost to ensure political gains.

Rajiv Gandhi had succumbed to pressure on the floor of Parliament. The country witnessed spectacles like Arif Mohammad Khan being fielded one day by Congress to support the legislation and then, later, ZR Ansari to oppose it. That incident saw the 'progressives', Congress and the Left on the same side. It also saw Congress changing gears on a UCC. The Constituent Assembly (CA) had debated it, and because of resistance from the Muslim representatives in the CA, had decided not to have a UCC while noting at the same time that it was a desirable objective for the country. And the subject was then placed under the Directive Principles of the Constitution.

Congress' changed stance saw the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) old complaint—that secularism as practised in India was not genuine but an appeasement of hardliners belonging to a particular community and indulgence of retrograde practices in the name of communal amity—gain resonance. The Central political narrative was never going to be the same again. Pseudo-secularism, minority appeasement, issues that were being raised for a while but failed to find traction among the public, found new momentum. Before BJP adopted the Ram Janmabhoomi resolution at Palampur, it was UCC that helped BJP expand its existing constituencies, find new ones, and acquire acceptability for its political viewpoint.

Once Congress changed gears on UCC in 1985-86, others quickly followed. UCC was part of the progressive discourse only till then. The 'progressives' and 'liberals' began to find ever new excuses to ensure protracted delay and digression on the subject. "The time is not ripe"; "support for the UCC should come from within the community"; and "there has to be consultation with the community"—such excuses became common. Recall, however, that when the Hindu laws were codified by the CA, there was no such consultation within the community or any question of waiting for the "right time". The decision was taken by BR Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru in the CA. But after the Shah Bano judgment, a new angle was also added by the 'progressives'—in keeping with the global discourse on multiculturalism, they argued that the UCC was a matter of choice, an issue of privacy, and so on. Such jargon was deployed only to defend their changed position.

Girls attend class under police protection at a government school in Udupi, February 14

REUTERS

IN THE *HIJAB* CASE, CONGRESS HAS VOLUNTARILY ENDORSED THE STAND TAKEN BY CONSERVATIVES. THERE WAS STEALTH IN HANDLING ITS CHANGING POSITION ON THE SHAH BANO CASE. NOT NOW. IRONICALLY, THIS IS HAPPENING AT A TIME WHEN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY ITSELF IS DIVIDED ON THE ISSUE

The same obfuscation and speciousness that governed the responses to the Shah Bano issue, and the call for the implementation of the UCC as a corollary to it, have now overtaken the *hijab* issue, reverberating in Karnataka today, as far as Congress, the Left/liberals and so-called 'progressives' are concerned.

On February 11th, Kavita Tewary—with a following of almost 18,000 on Twitter—posted a grainy black-and-white photograph of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, posing with the women's wing of the All India Muslim Students' Federation. "None of them are seen wearing the hijab or burqua, which proves it is not mandatory in Islam as claimed very recently," she observed.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, many of today's Islamic nations of South Asia and West Asia, North Africa and elsewhere, under the influence of colonial Britain and France and later, the US, witnessed the same Westernising zeal across sectors: from infrastructure to education to popular culture to medicine to governance models, everything underwent transformation from the traditional to the modern. Women from conservative societies in these regions benefited the most, abandoning their *hijab*, entering universities in disciplines ranging from international studies to engineering and medicine. They kicked their heels high at parties, donned fashionable skirts, became air hostesses, participated in beauty pageants, accessorised with trending bags at outings and wore swimsuits to beaches. From Jordan to Morocco, from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Iran and Iraq to Afghanistan, women in predominantly Islamic societies practised their religion without pegging it to the *burqa*, *hijab* or the *chador*. In the 1970s, the more daring in universities from Kabul to Beirut, from Amman to Cairo and Baghdad, even took to miniskirts, exposing calves and ankles and participating in sport like never before.

FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1970S, MANY OF TODAY'S ISLAMIC NATIONS WITNESSED A WESTERNISING ZEAL: FROM INFRASTRUCTURE TO EDUCATION TO POPULAR CULTURE. WOMEN BENEFITED THE MOST, ABANDONING THEIR *HIJAB*, ENTERING UNIVERSITIES IN DISCIPLINES RANGING FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDIES TO ENGINEERING AND MEDICINE

In 1953, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser famously scoffed at the Muslim Brotherhood's suggestion that the *hijab* be made mandatory for all women, with "Sir, I know you have a daughter in college and she doesn't wear a headscarf. You cannot convince your daughter to wear it and you expect me to make 10 million women wear it?" But all that changed in the late 1970s after the revolution that overthrew the regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi in Persia and the events that followed. The developments in the Shia-led Islamic Republic of Iran, with the entrenched religious elite and clergy dictating religious and cultural mores, had a domino effect in Islamic societies. Across regions, the *hijab*, *burqa* and the *chador* returned centrestage, a flaunted showpiece of Islamic religion and culture.

Going by the current support extended by Congress and the Left/liberal intellectuals and 'progressives' to those demanding *hijab*-wearing rights in schools and colleges, one would be forgiven for assuming that it was a controversy deliberately foisted on the Muslim community by the BJP government in Karnataka. This, notwithstanding the fact that like most other states in the country, many colleges have well-defined dress codes, as did the Government PU College for Girls in Udupi, the centre of the *hijab* storm. Students and parents (on their behalf) signed on to this in full agreement at the time of admission of their wards to the educational institution.

But there was an interesting backstory to these developments that needs to be told, especially to highlight how and why the Campus Front of India (CFI)—the student wing of the radical Islamic outfit Popular Front of India (PFI)—decided to intervene in the sensitive issue, to initiate, escalate and amplify the protests surrounding it, with just two months left for the annual examinations. In October last year, something seemingly unrelated had happened. There was an incident of rape on campus and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) took out a protest march in Udupi's Manipal. Several girl students joined the march, including two students from the Government PU College for Girls, wearing the *hijab*. All those involved in the protest were marked absent for the day. The two girls were among those asked to leave their classrooms on December 27th, beginning an agitation that spread like wildfire to Kundapura *taluk* and other parts of the state.

The protesting *hijabi* students were noticed by CFI, which then entered the picture. According to reports, CFI subsequently 'convinced' the girls to join. This set the stage for the two girls to raise the CFI-engineered game to politicise the *hijab*, based on the argument that it was "an essential part" of professing the Islamic faith and, therefore, a violation of their constitutional right.

The flames of protest, fanned by CFI, spread like wildfire to other colleges. PFI, the parent body, adopting its usual *modus operandi*, sought the support of 'progressives' for the agitation. In no time, Congress, which would have preferred ambiguity, decided to take a stand, with party general secretary and its main face in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, promptly tweeting that it was entirely the prerogative of a woman what to wear, whether a *hijab* or a bikini. That ridiculous tweet exposed publicly that Congress had little or no knowledge of the issue at hand simmering in Karnataka and/or was wantonly choosing to misinterpret the protest as one against a blanket *hijab* ban across the country for all Muslim women. The latter was intended, presumably, to resonate among minority voters in UP where elections are currently on. Little wonder, since the party's first family has steadfastly refused to take any sage advice from old timers, that Congress faces extinction in the politically potent state and has never come close to the Lok Sabha majority mark since the Shah Bano case of 1985. Priyanka Gandhi's tweet came soon after Karnataka's Congress strongman and former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah decided to support PFI's position on the *hijab* controversy.

PUSHKAR SINGH DHAMI HAS PROMISED THAT A UNIFORM CIVIL CODE WOULD BE IMPLEMENTED IN UTTARAKHAND IF HE RETURNED TO POWER. THAT FLOWED FROM THE REALISATION THAT NO CONSULTATIONS WITH THE HINDU COMMUNITY PREFACED THE CODIFYING OF HINDU LAWS BY THE LIKES OF NEHRU

Now, the lawyers representing the pro-*hijab* students in court—Kapil Sibal (Rajya Sabha MP), Devadatt Kamat (chairman of the legal committee for the UP polls), both have been pro-choice and pro-privacy in their positions, as part of their apparently progressive worldview—are arguing that the imposition of a ban on the *hijab* in schools/colleges goes against all that is progressive. Kamat went to the extent of claiming that wearing the *hijab* falls under the right to privacy as recognised under Article 21 of the Constitution, despite knowing that the same Constitution also places reasonable restrictions on the exercise of that right. This is virtually Shah Bano redux, in politically motivated responses. Progressives who would have otherwise interpreted the *hijab*, *burqa*, *chador* and other such overtly religious identity-linked items of clothing as oppressive symbols of patriarchy that seek to control women's agency over their own bodies and minds have now chosen to go silent or use the same lexicon used in the Shah Bano case to brazenly pander to the ulema and other hardliners.

From one government college in Udipi, the *hijab* controversy has now taken on a momentum of its own and spread across the country, from Karnataka to UP to Madhya Pradesh (MP) to Uttarakhand, besides provoking reactions from the US and the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF), Rashad Hussain, tweeted this a few days ago: "Religious freedom includes the ability to choose one's religious attire. The Indian state of Karnataka should not determine the permissibility of religious clothing. Hijab bans in schools violate religious freedom and stigmatize and marginalize women and girls." The General Secretariat of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation expressed "deep concern over recent public calls for the genocide of Muslims in Hindu Parliaments, harassment of Muslim women on social media and the banning from schools of female Muslim students wearing the hijab..." Both were rebuffed firmly by the Government for voicing their opinion on an issue that was fundamentally domestic.

"The OIC continues to be hijacked by vested interests to further nefarious propaganda against India. As a result, it has only harmed its own reputation," said Arindam Bagchi, spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs.

The matter has also taken on myriad layers of concern as it spread across the country. As with the Shah Bano issue, the *hijab* controversy has triggered renewed debate on the need for the UCC. Earlier this week, Uttarakhand Chief Minister and the face of BJP in the hill state, Pushkar Singh Dhami, promised that the UCC would be implemented in the state if he was returned to power. That itself flowed from the realisation that no consultations with the Hindu community prefaced the codifying of Hindu laws by the likes of Nehru although an aggressive argument is being forwarded by the 'progressives' for years about how the Muslim community has to be on board fully through consultations for implementing a common civil code.

The issue of a *hijab* ban in schools and colleges has also triggered a debate within the Muslim community and without on whether the headscarf, an incredibly gender-repressive religious garb, is essential to the practice of the religion. Clerics have dug up Quranic injunctions to insist that it is mandatory just like the five prescribed pillars of Islam— Shahada (faith), Salah (prayer), Zakat (alms giving), Sawm (fasting) and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). But the history of the *hijab* in Islam in predominantly Muslim nations such as Iran, which impacted a whole host of other Muslim countries, tells a completely different story. Prominent members of the community, such as Kerala governor Arif Mohammad Khan, who stood firmly against Congress' subterfuge in the Shah Bano case decades ago, maintain that the *hijab* is not mandatory under Islam, elucidating this with instances from the history of Turkey in the time of Kemal Atatürk, when the *hijab* was banned (its political resurgence is evident in Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey today) and from Tunisia. Public schools and government buildings in Kosovo have banned headscarves and religious covering since 2009, Azerbaijan since 2010, Tunisia since 1981 (partially lifted in 2011), and Turkey (ban gradually lifted). These are the only Muslim-majority countries that have banned the *burqa* in public spaces. In Muslim states like Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, Arif Mohammad Khan, Giani Zail Singh, Rajiv Gandhi and others, 1984

WHAT FOLLOWED THE SHAH BANO JUDGMENT WAS SHAMEFUL POLITICAL PUSILLANIMITY, MINORITY APPEASEMENT AND GENDER INJUSTICE, WITH THE RAJIV GANDHI GOVERNMENT OVERTURNING THE RULING BY PASSING A NEW LAW. A MOMENTOUS BATTLE FOR THE EQUALITY AND DIGNITY OF MUSLIM WOMEN WAS LOST TO ENSURE POLITICAL GAINS

there have been reported cases of discrimination against *hijabi* students, which is seen in the context of political Islam or of fundamentalism against a secular government.

The larger issue is that even if it is an essential element of Islam, and therefore clears the test of essential practice laid down by the Shirur Mutt case, the ruling in that 1954 case held that the term religion will cover all rituals and practices "integral to a religion" and that all of these can be regulated. The same argument was used in the Sabarimala case where the contention was that it was an essential practice for all those who reposed faith in the deity at Sabarimala. Yet, the Supreme Court had said no.

A strange cocktail of arguments has emerged in support of the *hijab* in schools since last December, ranging from the completely new concerns of privacy rights violation, fundamentalist arguments insisting that it is 'essential' for the practice of Islam sanctioned by Quran, and that very familiar trope: the whole thing has been engineered by BJP as part of its plan to impose the domination of Hindus over minorities. Supporters of the *hijab* were, ironically, unwilling to even accept the interim order of the High Court of Karnataka on the contentious issue although it was clearly established that the parents of the girls had agreed to enrol them after signing an agreement that laid down the prescribed uniform for students. That they had done so despite the *hijab* being an 'essential part' of the Islamic faith for all these years appears to have raised no concern whatsoever.

Thus far, the issue seems to be playing out according to a predetermined script. But there are still three or four moving parts, imponderables in this drama. One, given the bellicose manner in which the argument that the *hijab* is a must for practising Islam has been pursued, the intent of pushing the envelope is clear. Two, this open belligerence has found support from Congress to the conservative clergy. In the Shah Bano case, the support was an afterthought, driven mainly by political considerations and apprehensions. In the *hijab* case, however, Congress has voluntarily endorsed the stand taken by the ulemas and conservatives. There was more than an element of stealth while handling the party's changing position on the Shah Bano issue, best demonstrated by the title of the 1986 law—Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act—to cover up the actual intent of obfuscating and subverting that very thing, values enshrined in the Constitution. In the *hijab* case, however, one can see many mainstream political parties coming out openly to insist that *hijab* is a right. Ironically, this is happening at a time when the community itself is divided on the issue. This support from the mainstream parties displays an indulgence towards the new aggression of the community, thus marking the crossing of another red line, entering new and potentially dangerous territory.

Equally important to note is the spate of people coming out in saffron scarves and stoles in reaction to the *hijab* controversy. It is unlikely that this was spontaneous. But now, there is an effort to put saffron and *hijab* on the same footing. This comes at a time when saffron has been reduced to a pejorative—for the liberals, the colour is an ugly demonstration of religious militancy. It has got less to do with aesthetics and more to do with their political perspective. But the *bhagwa* has found widespread sanction. This is just the beginning. Especially since, unlike the last time when it took years for people to grasp the import of the Shah Bano case and its aftermath—the message of appeasement and pseudo-secularism—the ground is fertile this time round. Additionally, BJP is not a force just in Karnataka but all over India. There is a larger constituency today which is far more receptive to its message than was the case in 1985. This time, it is unlikely to be a silent acquiescing in Muslim aggression, backed by the cynical patronage of progressives. ■

THEY HAVE COME A LONG WAY

MUSLIM GIRLS AND WOMEN HAVE MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS IN EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT THAT MUST BE PROTECTED FROM THE NOISY POLITICS OF THE HIJAB

| By RAJEEV DESHPANDE |

Photos GETTY IMAGES

A polarising debate on wearing the *hijab* to school and whether the piece of clothing is essential to Islamic practice has obscured steady and significant gains made by Muslim girls and women in accessing school and college education, skill development and other welfare benefits, helped by the Narendra Modi Government's massive minority outreach which has seen it spend more than ₹21,500 crore on such schemes and projects since 2014.

At first glance, the progress may appear less than spectacular as a 62 per cent Muslim female literacy lags Muslim males (74.7 per cent) and compares poorly with women from other minorities. The Hindu female literacy rate of 64.3 per cent seems only a shade better, but the results need to be seen keeping in mind a relatively smaller Muslim population. Data presented to Parliament by the Centre in August 2021 also reveals an overall literacy rate of 68.5 per cent for Muslims, several percentage points behind all other religious groups.

But while the advance in educational and social development of Muslim women may look modest, there is an encouraging

BANAT INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

A Muslim girl in Srinagar working in her school's laboratory

uptick considering a historical backlog—enhanced by what researchers and social activists describe as conservative attitudes—in terms of increasing enrolment and reduced dropout rates at the school and college level. A high dropout rate of 73 per cent at primary and secondary levels has fallen to 32 per cent (Ministry of Minority Affairs data) and the share of college-going Muslim women among the total number of women in the 18-23 age group has risen from 6.7 per cent in 2007-08 to 13.5 per cent in 2017-18. Karnataka, where the *hijab* row surfaced, has seen the gross attendance ratio improve from a poor 1.1 per cent in 2007-08 to 15.8 per cent in 2017-18, above the national average. There has been an increase in enrolment of Muslim girls as a percentage of total enrolment of girls in upper primary, secondary and higher secondary levels as well from 2015-16 to 2019-20.

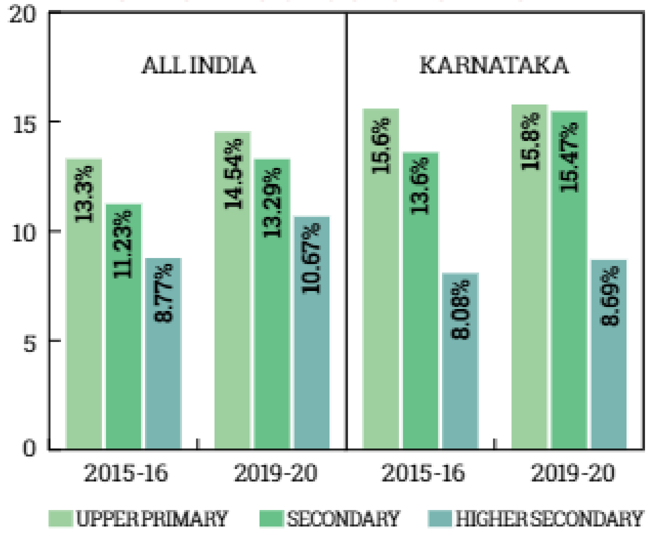
As part of efforts to provide better facilities to areas with minority concentration, the Government has in the last eight years developed social and economic infrastructure worth ₹11,000 crore. This includes close to 25,000 additional class rooms, 35 degree colleges, 97 ITIs, 174 residential schools, more than 18,000 drinking water facilities, 75 sport facilities and 23 working women's hostels. On the whole, more than 55 per cent of beneficiaries are women, and many among them from the Muslim community. Hunar hubs or skill centres in particular have benefitted women craftpersons who are half the beneficiaries while camps have been set up in states like Jammu and Kashmir to educate young people for scholarships and fellowships offered by the Government. "Many of the families benefitted would not have been able to send girls to school but for the support of various schemes. Muslim girls have to overcome lack of means as well as a mindset that does not prioritise modern education for them," says Minister of Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi (see interview). He stresses that far from discriminating against minorities, the Government has expanded the reach of support programmes much beyond the 90 'minority' districts identified by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The UPA initiative definitely marked an effort to focus on areas with higher minority populations but the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has moved to enhance the scope of schemes both in terms of budgets and coverage.

If the state is enlarging minority welfare, with Muslims likely to be 'natural' beneficiaries of targeted as well as general interventions, given the community's social and economic disadvantages as compared to other minorities like Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Parsis, what prevents faster empowerment of Muslim girls? Is the state's insistence that rules on issues like dress codes or uniforms—where they have been set out by institutions—must be respected retarding women's education? Or are conservative beliefs and religious dogma a bigger hurdle to female participation in mainstream education? "The state has no role in setting the rules of various education institutions that are under discussion in the context of the *hijab* debate. The Indian Constitution sets out secular principles. Even in religious terms, there is no particular prescription or core principle in the Holy Quran or the Hadid (a chapter of the holy book) as regards the *hijab*. The current controversy is politicised and intended to create trouble during ongoing elections," says well-known educationist and social worker Firoz Bhakt Ahmed. He argues that the *hijab* controversy does more harm than good to the cause of educating Muslim girls as they are pushed into a straitjacket shaped by regressive views while public discourse is defined by political binaries. "Suddenly, everyone is talking in terms of BJP or anti-BJP and the interests of the affected party—girls from the Muslim community—are lost sight of," says Ahmed.

Private as well as government-supported research often identifies poverty and early marriage as reasons for higher dropout rates among Muslim girls. A 240-page report by the National Productivity Council (NPC) on dropout rates of students from minority communities in its analysis of various districts repeatedly concludes that "Poverty, early marriage among Muslim girls and support to their family in earning livelihood were the main reasons for drop-outs." While the NPC study looked at data for the years 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17, the nature of

A PUSH FOR EDUCA

ENROLMENT OF MUSLIM GIRLS AS PROPORTION OF TOTAL ENROLMENT OF GIRLS IN 2019-20 SHOWS A RISE

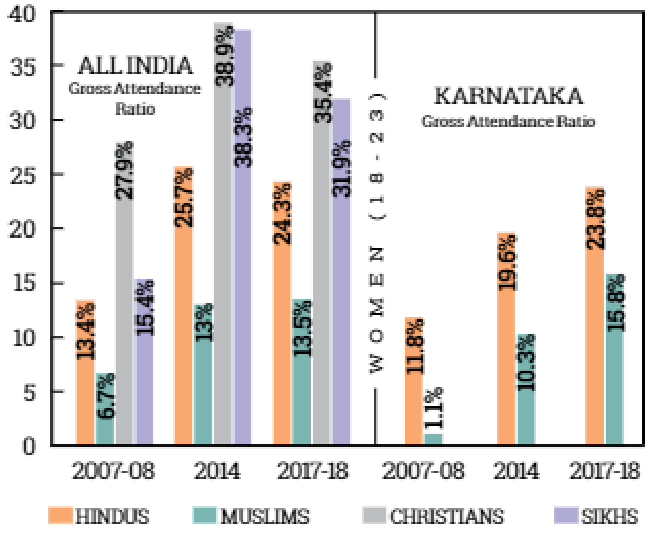


Source: Unified district information system for education

SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE OF MUSLIM GIRLS FELL FROM 73% TO 32% SINCE 2014

Source: Ministry of Minority Affairs

SHARE OF COLLEGE-GOING MUSLIM WOMEN IN RELEVANT FEMALE AGE GROUP HAS GONE UP



Source: NSS 64, 71, 75 rounds

the problem has not changed over the years. "The most common factor for high incidence of non-enrolment, drop outs and low achievement among Muslim girls stated are poverty, lack of women teachers, absence of separate schools for girls, observance of Purdah, opposition to secular education for girls, early marriage and conservative attitudes," notes a voluminous 2007 report titled 'An analytical study of education of Muslim women and girls in India' (commissioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development) by Usha Nayar, who has written extensively on education and women. "In 2001, 40.5% females were married before the age of eighteen in India; 34.4% among Hindus, 41% Muslims, 38.2% Buddhists, 23.1% Jains, 15.2% Christians, 15.9% Sikhs," notes the study. It seems clear that social environment, and this includes the role of religion and laws framed by the state, plays a significant role in shaping women's education and the *hijab* controversy may well strengthen the hands of conservative elements who, while raising the issue of religious rights, have hardly any sympathy for the cause of educating Muslim girls.

Ahmed points out that attitudes towards educating girls are often driven by unfounded assumptions like fears that women will turn 'rebels' and oppose the wishes of their families. "Unfortunately, controversies like the current one only reinforce such viewpoints. It is argued that religious identity is under threat. I am glad that so far the courts have upheld the right of institutions to set their norms. The alleged debate over choice is actually one intended to create more divisiveness," he says and wonders what the reaction would be if restrictive dress codes were prescribed for men on allegedly religious grounds. The odds are loaded against women in other communities as well as the significant number of below-legal age marriages indicates, but the disadvantages are more challenging for communities already grappling with larger social deficits as Muslims do for being late starters in the adoption of modern education, the reasons for which range from a prevailing suspicion of modernity and also go back to policies framed by colonial administrators after the 1857 first war of independence. In a 2018 study titled 'Educational Status of Muslim Women in India: Issues and Challenges', Manzoor Khan, Manzoor Hussain and Farooq Ahmed Khan of the University of Kashmir discuss Islamic perspectives on women's education, arguing that there is no inherent injunction to discriminate between boys and girls. They argue that any religious commandment, even if the masculine gender is used, applies to women as well and acquisition of knowledge is obligatory. The challenge is to turn opinion towards modern education. "They [Muslims] don't want to give higher education to their daughters due to many reasons...at present somehow they are now coming up [accessing] education and improving day by day for the last two decades and are learning to stand on their own feet, but this effort is just a drop in the ocean. Muslims have a lower

TION AND WELFARE

IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS, LEGAL RIGHTS AND HEALTH

36% Mudra (small business) loan beneficiaries are women, 60% of them Muslim

More than 9 crore women got free LPG under Ujjwala, including 37% from minority communities; most of these beneficiaries are Muslim

Of 12 crore farmers given PM Samman Nidhi, 33% are from among minorities

More than 5,000 women have been on Hajj unaccompanied since the rule was changed in 2017

Before 2014, 3.3 crore minority students received scholarships. Since then, 5.1 crore students from Muslim, Parsi, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain communities have benefitted; 50% are girls. ₹14,132 crore disbursed

41% of beneficiaries who received ₹4,192 crore assistance since 2014, from National Minority Development and Finance Corporation, are women

7,50,000 artisans, craftpersons and associated individuals benefitted from Hunar Haat employment scheme since 2016; 50% of them women

Prior to 2014, just 97,000 youth from minority communities were given skill training. Since then, 11,88,000 have benefitted, 48% women, the majority being Muslim

Source: Ministry of Minority Affairs

INCIDENTS OF TRIPLE TALAQ BEFORE AND AFTER THE PASSAGE OF LAW BANNING THE PRACTICE

Cases reported as of August 2019 3,42,005

Cases reported after August 2019 1,039

Sources: Ministry of Minority Affairs, based on data from Waqf Boards, minority commissions and local administrations. Data does not cover all states

INTERVIEW **MUKHTAR ABBAS NAQVI**

‘THERE IS A CONSPIRACY TO PREVENT FROM ACCESSING MAINSTREAM EDU

The minister of minority affairs speaks to RAJEEV DESHPANDE on the hijab controversy, calling it a politically motivated campaign

The row over the *hijab* in schools and colleges has raised concerns as to whether not allowing the item of clothing will impede the education of Muslim girls. What do you make of the situation and why has the issue come up?
This is nothing but an attempt to put a Talibani *tala* (lock) on the education and progress of Muslim women. This was not called for as there is enough room to respect all beliefs in our country. But our common text, our shared religion, is the Constitution. India has more than three lakh registered mosques, then there are other religious shrines. There are more than 50,000 madrassas as well. Now, after Narendra Modi*ji* became prime minister, our pledge for inclusive development has redefined certain longstanding concepts. It is about development with dignity, empowerment without appeasement. His promise of development is not premised on any ‘deal’ votes. All sections have got equal opportunities. No one has been able to allege that Modi*ji* has discriminated against any group in the matter of development. This accusation has never been levelled. False narratives on so-called intolerance and award *wapsi* have not changed this. The Government has addressed the need for reforms to counter social evils, whether it is triple *talaq* or allowing women to go on Hajj unaccompanied.

These measures have been appreciated by Muslim women and now, in the middle of elections, this *hijab* row happens. We see Rahul Gandhi spreading misinformation on the issue of uniforms in educational institutions. Priyanka Gandhi takes it one step further. Then Pakistan gets into the act and influences the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to issue statements. This is the same Pakistan that has seen its minorities reduced to a couple of percent. Then the role of the Popular Front of India (PFI) and its other fronts, also sponsored for a purpose, is detected. The idea is to defame India. The Modi-bashing brigade is now a Bharat-bashing brigade. But instead, the prime minister is well regarded in nations like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

But there have been several such issues raised from time to time.
Yes, like cases of lynching which were criminal acts but presented as communal acts. The agitation against the amendments in the Citizenship Act that had nothing to do with Indian Muslims. The effort was to present India as unsafe for minorities. But most people, including most minorities, have not fallen for this. They wonder at the people who claim to speak on their behalf and about how Pakistan seeks to interfere in such matters.

It has been argued that the *hijab* is an essential part of Islamic practice. How do you respond?
I am not an Islamic scholar. But I can tell you that the *hijab* is not part of religion. It is a practice. Is *ghunghat* written in a *dharmic* text? We are not a religious state. We are democratic and secular. Every college or institution has a dress code, discipline and decorum. We will have to accept this. If you do not like it, you can choose a different institution. There is a conspiracy behind making some girls the so-called icons of this ‘*hijabi hurdang* (row)’, to prevent girls from accessing mainstream education.

How is this being done?
The point is that enrolment rates have gone up, dropout rates are falling. The Government has worked hard to assist the poor in Muslim society. The result is that girls have benefitted. What

MUSLIM GIRLS
CATION'

used to happen, in a family with, say, two girls, is that they would be educated till around Class 2 or 3. After that, the family would say they had to think about these girls being married off at some stage and it would be best for them to stay at home and learn some minor skills. Government schemes are changing this. There has been a big section against mainstream education for girls. This is the truth. There were always *fatwas* issued against allowing girls to attend schools or access modern education. Our Government paid attention to all this and there was a disgruntled murmur about girls going to school. The outcry against the move to raise the age of marriage is part of this. Why did some people say get girls married at 12 or they will become *awara* (out of control)? They are the same set now raising the *hijab* issue.

How does this relate to the *hijab*?
There are several high court rulings setting out the rules and norms on uniforms and dress codes. There are Islamic institutions, as in Keraka, which do not insist on the *hijab*. It's the same in several Islamic countries. The point is that you use a *hijab* in a market or on the street but when you attend an institution, its rules, as supported by court rulings and the law, must be followed.

In this and other cases, the Government is accused of being anti-Islam.
What is our guiding principle? The Constitution. There are rights and duties. The followers of all major religions are here; there are people who are irreligious too. That is evidence of this nation's commitment to tolerance and coexistence.

On another issue, it has been a few years since the passage of the law banning triple *talaq*. Has acceptance of the law improved?
I think so. So many families have been saved from breaking up. There is an 80 per cent reduction in cases. More importantly, many disputes are being resolved by compromise. This was a social ill. Congress undid a progressive ruling by the Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case. Modi*ji* brought a law to implement as a Supreme Court ruling. This is the difference. Today, parties like the Samajwadi Party are instigating Muslim women not to show Ids and allow visual identification for voting. This is nothing but another way of preventing them from voting.

share in professional education…Their madarsas are following traditional and old syllabus in the time of globalization and information technology. Their syllabus is far away from scientific and commercial knowledge," the study says. A reliance on traditional or madrassa education, which is heavily based on religious teaching, is seen as adequate for a girl to equip her for life in society while modern education may be considered unnecessary or downright undesirable.

A**s noted earlier, Muslims often "self-select" as** beneficiaries for welfare schemes. Of more than 2.22 crore poor people provided houses, 31 per cent are from minority communities. A religion-wise break-up is not available but officials estimate many of the beneficiaries in this category are Muslim households. Over 22 per cent beneficiaries of the 11.12 crore toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Mission are from among the minorities. Officials said between 22 and 37 per cent beneficiaries of schemes like Jan Dhan Yojana, Ayushman Bharat, Har Ghar Jal and household electrification programmes are from minority communities and more than 50 per cent are women. Though these schemes are not directly related to education of Muslim women, they do help in creating an enabling environment while scholarships lighten the load on families that might prioritise male children in view of limited resources. There has been a sharp rise in the number of minority students receiving scholarships to 5.1 crore since 2014. Since 2014, the Centre has spent ₹14,300 crore on scholarships and educational schemes, ₹2,140 crore on employment-oriented skill development, ₹4,192 crore on financial assistance under the National Minorities Development Finance Corporation (NMDFC) and ₹10,810 crore on 49,400 projects under the PM Jan Vikas Karyakram. A substantial number of beneficiaries of these and other schemes like Ujjwala are Muslim women. Another area of reform not attempted prior to 2014 is geospatial mapping of Waqf properties that are often vulnerable to encroachment or caught in legal tangles. GIS mapping of 2,24,300 properties has been completed and as many as 7,79,750 Waqf properties have been registered online. The Centre is providing 100 per cent funding for the development of schools, colleges, hospitals, community halls, common service centres and other basic infrastructure on Waqf lands under the PM Jan Vikas Karyakram for the weaker sections and the needy, especially girls in backward areas deprived of such basic facilities. The Hajj process has also gone digital with a mobile app as well.

The noisy politics over *hijab*, and the counter-mobilisation for saffron scarves, should settle once a judicial verdict is delivered by the High Court of Karnataka, even though the matter is almost certain to reach the Supreme Court. But amid the clash of competing claims and visions lies the need to protect the success of Muslim women in achieving gains that are still fragile and prevent them from falling victim to yet more political bloodletting. ■

OF A UNIFO

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

RM DRESS CODE

WHEN INDIVIDUAL INTEREST MUST YIELD TO INSTITUTIONAL INTEREST

| By J SAI DEEPAK |

Ever since the *hijab* controversy broke out last month, popular debates across platforms and portals both within Bharat and abroad have generalised the issue as one that relates to discrimination against a particular religious minority, instead of examining the specifics of the row in Karnataka. The issue at hand is nowhere close to or even remotely comparable to France's *hijab* ban, so let's start with what educational institutions in Karnataka are permitted by law before we look into what transpired on the ground.

The legislation that governs educational institutions in Karnataka is the Karnataka Education Act of 1983 which has been in force since January 20th, 1995. Under Section 133, the state government may also issue any direction to any educational institution to achieve the purpose of the Act. Further, as is the case with most legislation, the 1983 Act also contains a specific provision, namely Section 145, which empowers the state government to frame rules. Under this provision, the Karnataka Educational Institutions (Classification, Regulation and Prescription of Curricula Etc) Rules, 1995 were notified. Here is Rule 11 which applies to the issue at hand (emphases added):

"11. Provision of Uniform, Clothing, Text Books etc., (1) *Every recognised educational institution may specify its own set of Uniform. Such uniform once specified shall not be changed within the period of next five years.*

(2) *When an educational institution intends to change the uniform as specified in sub-rule (1) above, it shall issue notice to parents in this regard at least one year in advance.*

(3) Purchase of uniform clothing and text books from the school or from a shop etc., suggested by school authorities and stitching of uniform clothing with the tailors suggested by the school authorities, shall be at the option of the student or his parent. The school authorities shall make no compulsion in this regard."

Section 2(30) defines a "recognised educational institution" as an educational institution recognised or deemed to be recognised under the Act. When Section 2(30) is read along with Rule 11, this much is clear that a recognised educational institution in Karnataka has the power to prescribe its own uniform, which also includes the power to identify what *does not* constitute uniform. What does this translate to?

First, it is no one's case thus far that this power is not available to the institutions in Udupi which are at the centre of the controversy. Second, on the face of it, there appears to be no fetter on the power of these institutions to lay down a dress code so long as it is reasonable. Third, no one has been able to demonstrate that these institutions have laid down any rule, much less enforced one, which targets any one community.

Fourth, the power vested in recognised educational institutions under Rule 11 has not been called into question on ground of unconstitutionality for vesting excessive power in schools. This is not to say that the rule cannot be challenged now; however, the point being made is that, legally, until the rule exists and is applied across the board to students of all faiths, it makes no sense whatsoever to argue that since the wearing of the *hijab* does not affect anyone, it should be permitted. After all, this undermines the purpose of a "uniform" whose underlying intent is to ensure that religious differences do not stand out in a classroom to the extent possible. Of course, it is open to an institution to permit visible religious symbols over and above the uniform, but it equally reserves the right to proscribe it.

On the limited power of Courts to interfere with the internal administration of educational institutions, here's an observation by the Madras High Court in *Sir M. Venkata Subba Rao vs Sir M. Venkata Subba Rao* (2004) wherein a dress code laid down for teachers by a school was the subject of challenge (emphases added):

"12. On a combined reading of the above provisions, it is seen that the Board of Matriculation Schools has the overall control as to the maintenance of the school and also to issue directions from time to time to the teachers, and on such directions, the teachers shall confirm to the same. The power of the management of the school to issue the impugned circular prescribing dress code shall be traceable to clause 6 of Annexure VIII (Agreement). *In that view of the matter, we do not find any merit in the contention of the learned counsel for appellant that the respondent-school management has no power to issue circulars prescribing the dress code.*

THERE APPEARS TO BE NO FETTER ON THE POWER OF INSTITUTIONS TO LAY DOWN A DRESS CODE SO LONG AS IT IS REASONABLE. NO ONE HAS BEEN ABLE TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THESE INSTITUTIONS HAVE LAID DOWN ANY RULE, MUCH LESS ENFORCED ONE, WHICH TARGETS ANY ONE COMMUNITY

13. The next question to be considered is, how far the imposition of dress code would be reasonable. As we have emphasised the need for education and correspondingly the responsibility of a teacher in bringing up a student to be useful to the nation, *we consider that the Court would be very slow in interfering with the internal administration of the management of the school, more particularly, in the matter of discipline. We have already traced out the power of the management to issue circulars prescribing dress code. A perusal of the circular reveals that the dress code is uniformly made applicable to all the teachers. We do not find any discrimination in this regard. Regulation of a dress code is only to maintain uniformity in discipline. In the absence of any discrimination, we do not find that the dress code could be called as unreasonable restriction warranting any challenge before this Court. Hence, we do not find any merit in the submission of the learned counsel for appellant that the dress code is unreasonable.*

... *A vague statement of victimisation cannot be a ground to interfere with the order, more particularly, when the circular is sought to be enforced uniformly on all the teachers without any discrimination. When the dress code is insisted on each and every teacher without any exception in order to follow uniformity in discipline, we do not find any interference is required in the challenge to the impugned circular. The dress code introduced is ultimately for the interest and welfare of the students.* If the matter is viewed in the light of the observations made above, no interference is called for in the challenge to the order in the writ petition."

In 2002, in a case whose factual matrix is similar to that of the Karnataka controversy, following were the observations of the Division Bench of the Bombay High Court in *Miss Fathema Hussain Sayed vs Bharat Education Society And Ors.* (emphases added):

"2. The petitioner Ms. Fathema Hussain Sayed (minor) is a student of standard VI in Karthika English School (respondent No.2). It is her case that she was asked by the Principal of the School to not to attend class from 28.11.2001 if she wore the head scarf. This direction given by the Principal to the petitioner on 28.11.2001 is under challenge in this writ petition. The petitioner says that she hails from Muslim family and follows the Islam religion and since the Holy Quran provides that a female child after 9 years of age should cover her head by scarf, she started wearing head-scarf from June, 2001. According to her, head-scarf does not violate the dress code or the discipline of respondent No.2 school and therefore, the direction given by the Principal on 28.11.2001 is violative of petitioner's fundamental right of freedom of conscience and professing, propagating and practicing Islam religion

...we find it difficult to accept the submission of the learned counsel that by not permitting the petitioner to wear head-scarf, the fundamental right of the petitioner under Article 25 is violated...

6. *By asking petitioner who is student in class VIth standard of respondent No.2 school to maintain the dress code prescribed by the school, how can it be said that the petitioner's fundamental right of freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion is violated...*There does not seem to be such established practice and profession of the Islam religion from covering their heads by the girls studying in all-girls school. The learned counsel for the petitioner however, sought to place reliance upon verse 31 of chapter 24-64 of Holy Quran (Quran-E-Majid). Verse 31 reads thus- "31. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or those whom their right hands possess, or the male servants not having need (of women), or the children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and

let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful.

7. A girl student not wearing the head-scarf or head covering studying in exclusive girls section cannot be said to in any manner acting inconsistent with the aforesaid verse 31 or violating any injunction provided in Holy Quran. It is not an obligatory overt act enjoined by Muslim religion that a girl studying in all girl section must wear head-covering. The essence of Muslim religion or Islam cannot be said to have been interfered with by directing petitioner not to wear head-scarf in the school.

8. We, therefore, do not find any merit in the contention of the learned counsel for the petitioner that direction given by the Principal to the petitioner on 28.11.2001 to not to wear head-scarf or cover her head while attending school is violative of Article 25 of Constitution of India."

IN THE FACTS OF THE KARNATAKA *HIJAB* CONTROVERSY, RULE 11 OF THE 1995 RULES CATEGORICALLY BESTOWS UPON RECOGNISED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THE POWER TO PRESCRIBE A UNIFORM DRESS CODE, WHICH CANNOT BE DILUTED TO ACCOMMODATE THE INTEREST OF ANY SINGLE COMMUNITY OR INDIVIDUAL

Of course, it could be argued that the above judgment was delivered in the context of an all-girls school. However, what is relevant is the finding that wearing of a headscarf is not mandated by or essential to the practice of Islam regardless of the nature of the school. Interestingly, Justice A Muhamed Mustaque of the Kerala High Court has held to the contrary in 2016 in *Amnah Bint Basheer vs Central Board of Secondary Education*. This was a case where the dress code prescribed by the CBSE for the All-India Pre-Medical Test was challenged by a Muslim student for disallowing the headscarf. After examining the Quran and the Hadith on the subject, Justice Mustaque held as follows:

"29. Thus, the analysis of the Quranic injunctions and the Hadiths would show that it is a farz to cover the head and wear the long sleeved dress except face part and exposing the body otherwise is forbidden (haram). When farz is violated by any action opposite to farz that action becomes forbidden (haram). However, there is a possibility of having different views or opinions for the believers of the Islam based on ijithihad (independent reasoning). This Court is not discarding such views. The possibility of having different propositions is not a ground to deny the freedom, if such propositions have some foundation in the claim. As has been adverted above, the claim of the petitioners is well founded even though, a different view is possible. This Court is only expected to safeguard such freedom based on the Constitution in preference to giving a religious verdict.

30. The discussions as above would show that covering the head and wearing a long sleeve dress by women have been treated as an essential part of the Islamic religion. It follows a fortiori, Article 25(1) protects such prescription of the dress code. Then the only question remains is the essential practice as above would offend the public order, morality, and health or is it necessary to regulate such essential practice to give effect to other provisions of Part III of the Constitution...

31. The rationale for prescribing dress code by the Board is to avoid malpractices in the examination. The prescription as above is not by invoking an interest of public order or morals of the society. The public order is one which would affect community or public at large. The morality is pertaining to conscience or moral sense of the prescribed standards in the society. The health denotes well-being of a person. The restriction by the Board can be only on any grounds referred as above. In the absence of any conditions referable under Article 25(1), the essential practice cannot be regulated or restrained. No doubt, a restriction can be imposed under Article 19(2) of the Constitution in the interest of the security of the State as contemplated under Article 25(1) which also states the freedom would be subject to the provisions of Part III of the Constitution.

32. The right of women to have the choice of dress based on religious injunctions is a fundamental right protected under Article 25(1), when such prescription of dress is an essential part of the religion. As has been noted above, that right can be negated only in any of the circumstances referred under Article 25(1). The attempt of the Board to ensure transparency and credibility of the examinations also cannot be ignored by this Court. However, the approach of the Court is always to harmoniously accommodate the competing interest without there being any conflict or repugnancy. The interest of the Board can be safeguarded by allowing the invigilator to frisk such candidates including by removing scarf. However, safeguard has to be ensured that this must be done honouring the religious sentiments of the candidates. Therefore, women invigilators can be permitted to frisk such candidates.

35. This Court already found that the right to practice the essential part of the religion as guaranteed under Article 25(1) is a negative liberty which means the person is insulated from interference by the authority or the State except in situations referred therein. Therefore, the Board cannot restrict the claim of any similarly situated persons.

36. However, the practical difficulty in implementing the direction of this Court has to be considered. This Court taking note of the practical difficulty of the Board for the conduct of the examination during the last year, in W.P.(C).No.21696/2015 had provided sufficient safeguards. This Court is of the view that

the same can be followed for this year as well, and the Board can take necessary steps for the next year onwards, while inviting applications itself, to protect such rights. It is to be noted practical difficulty cannot be an excuse to honor the fundamental rights. Therefore, this Court is of the view that for this year the Board shall permit all candidates, who based on the religious practice want to wear head scarf and full sleeved length dress, to appear for the exams.

37. This Court need not interfere with the dress code prescription as referred in the Board's prospectus as others are bound by such prescription except to hold that the dress code as above shall not be enforced against the candidates, who by virtue of Article 25(1) are protected from wearing such dress as prescribed in the injunctions of their faith. The writ petition is allowed and disposed of by granting relief as ordered in W.P. (C).No. 21696/2015 to all who fall within the same class as protected under Article 25(1). It is made clear that all such candidates will have to report at the Centre at least half an hour before the schedule time."

WHAT IS CRITICAL TO NOTE IS THE TIMING OF THIS CONTROVERSY AND THE FACT THAT UNTIL DECEMBER 2021, NEITHER WAS THE *HIJAB* WORN BY MUSLIM STUDENTS IN THESE INSTITUTIONS NOR WAS THE ENFORCEMENT OF THE RULE QUESTIONED. CLEARLY, THERE IS MORE TO THE ISSUE THAN MEETS THE EYE

In another judgment delivered in *Fathima Thasneem (minor) And Other v. The State of Kerala, And Others* in 2018 by the very same judge of the Kerala High Court, Justice A Muhamed Mustaque, it was held in the context of a private Christian institution that while *hijab* was essential to the practice of Islam, a private educational institution too had the fundamental right to manage its affairs in a manner it deemed fit. Therefore, balancing both competing rights, Justice Mustaque held as follows:

"8. In every human relationship, there evolves an interest. In the competing rights, if not resolved through the legislation, it is a matter for judicial adjudication. The Court, therefore, has to balance those rights to uphold the interest of the dominant rather than the subservient interest. The dominant interest represents the larger interest and the subservient interest represents only individual interest. If the dominant interest is not allowed to prevail, subservient interest would march over the dominant interest resulting in chaos. The dominant interest, in this case, is the management of the institution. If the management is not given free hand to administer and manage the institution that would denude their fundamental right...

9. The Apex Court in Asha Renjan and Others v. State of Bihar and Others[(2017) 4 SCC 397] accepted the balance test when competing rights are involved and has taken a view that individual interest must yield to the larger public interest. Thus, conflict to competing rights can be resolved not by negating individual rights but by upholding larger right to remain, to hold such relationship between institution and students.

10. In such view of the matter, I am of the considered view that the petitioners cannot seek imposition of their individual right as against the larger right of the institution. It is for the institution to decide whether the petitioners can be permitted to attend the classes with the headscarf and full sleeve shirt. It is purely within the domain of the institution to decide on the same. The Court cannot even direct the institution to consider such a request. Therefore, the writ petition must fail. Accordingly, the writ petition is dismissed. If the petitioners approach the institution for Transfer Certificate, the school authority shall issue Transfer Certificate without making any remarks. No doubt, if the petitioners are willing to abide by the school dress code, they shall be permitted to continue in the same school."

In light of the above cases, there appears to be a difference of opinion between a Division Bench of the Bombay High Court (2002) and a single judge of the Kerala High Court (2018) on the essentiality of the *hijab* in Islam. Notwithstanding my reservations about the very application of the Essential Religious Practices test by Courts, even if the *hijab* is essential, both the 2002 and 2018 judgments are on the same page on the issue of individual interest yielding to institutional interest, especially when the law vests an institution with the autonomy to prescribe a uniform dress code. In the facts of the Karnataka controversy, Rule 11 of the 1995 Rules categorically bestows upon recognised educational institutions the power to prescribe a uniform dress code, which cannot be diluted to accommodate the interest of any single community or individual.

That apart, what is critical to note is the timing of this controversy and the fact that until December 2021, neither was the *hijab* worn by Muslim students in these institutions nor was the enforcement of the rule questioned. Clearly, there is more to the issue than meets the eye which is corroborated by the involvement of certain student organisations which seem to have instigated the controversy to claim victimisation of Muslim students. The co-ordinated mobilisation of crowds and opinions both in Bharat and abroad is all too reminiscent of Shaheen Bagh and Singhu border. One hopes that for once the Indian state will grow a spine and send such elements a stern message. ■

J Sai Deepak is an engineer-turned-lawyer practising as an arguing counsel before the Supreme Court of India and the High Court of Delhi. He is the author of India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution

Hum Padhenge
FASCISM
WOMEN WILL DESTROY HINDURASHTRA

Protesting students in Kolkata perform a street play about the *hijab* controversy in Karnataka, February 11

GETTY IMAGES

THE RAGE OF THE CAMPUS FRONT

BEHIND THE MYSTERIOUS APPEAL OF THE STUDENT ARM OF THE POPULAR FRONT OF INDIA LIES ITS AGGRESSIVE POSTURING AND THE FEAR IT EVOKES

By ULLEKH NP

Zainaba (name changed), a medical student in Mysuru, had ignored a group of curious young men watching her at a coffee shop by force of habit. She had grown used to such stares over the years. When she was leaving, two of them turned up to inquire about the name of her friend who was with her. And when the young man, her classmate, revealed his name, they demanded that he leave so that they could speak to her in "private". She was told that hanging out with a man from another religious community wasn't a "good thing". She remembers the duo going on about the need to be proud of her religious identity (which they had guessed from the *hijab* she was wearing). "They were polite, but the whole thing left me in a state of shock. They then disclosed that they were members of a student organisation whose name I was not much familiar with before: Campus Front of India [CFI]. If I needed any help, I could contact them. One of them passed me his name and number," Zainaba recalls. "This happened in 2018 and since then, they have become very popular among Muslim students here," adds this medical student who is now pursuing her postgraduate studies.

Another young female Muslim student from Kozhikode, in northern Kerala, says CFI workers have an air of avuncularity about them. "We are here to help you with whatever problems you face, from professors or from fellow students. You must join CFI and come for our seminars and meetings," avers this commerce student who would only disclose her first name: Ayesha. "They are good to us, and genuinely care for us. But I keep a distance from them because my parents are orthodox Muslims who have warned me against CFI and PFI," she says. PFI is short for Popular Front of India, an organisation that the National Investigation Agency (NIA) wants banned, although the Ministry of Home Affairs has not done anything about the recommendation yet.

PFI was launched in 2006 through a merger of hardline Islamic organisations, such as the National Development Front, the Karnataka Forum for Dignity and the Manitha Neethi Pasarai of Tamil Nadu. Later, organisations such as Goa's Citizen's Forum, Community Social and Educational Society of Rajasthan, Nagarik Adhikar Suraksha Samiti of West Bengal, Manipur's Lilong Social Forum and Association of Social Justice of Andhra Pradesh were brought into the fold. CFI was launched in 2009 and has seen rapid acceptance across Central universities, minority institutions and many campuses in south India. As evident from its official website, CFI is hyperactive politically, responding to each and every event that concerns not only the Muslim community but also human rights. A survey of students across universities in Delhi, Hyderabad, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh brings to the fore the growing role of CFI as a cadre-based mobiliser of Muslim students. The organisation was at the forefront of the anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and anti-NRC protests, among others, in Delhi and other cities and towns. It often picks issues and laps them up to further its political interests. In the process, it has earned notoriety, along with the parent PFI, for what federal agencies call fomenting communal hatred and anti-national activities. Both organisations had come under the radar of intelligence agencies earlier than 2014, and especially since 2012, when then Congress Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had said that the southern states had seen a spike in religious extremism. Both PFI and CFI were accused of masterminding a hate campaign that year against northeastern students who fled home from boomtowns such as Bengaluru, Pune and others in the face of online rumours of retaliation against them over attacks on Muslims in Assam. Both entities had denied any wrongdoing back then.

With the *hijab* row bringing CFI to the centrestage and even part of the national discourse, the question that arises is: What exactly makes CFI extremely attractive to Muslim students and youth?

A **Kerala-based former DGP who has closely** followed the growth of CFI and also its parent PFI says that Muslims disillusioned with traditional political parties, including the communists, Congress and mainstream Muslim parties, flock to these two organisations because they evoke fear and, therefore, a kind of strange respect. "You look at an institution like the University College in Thiruvananthapuram, a stronghold of the Students' Federation of India (SFI), the arm of CPM, where nobody else dares take out a procession. But a handful of CFI students organise marches and events and they are not questioned, nor do they face physical threat, unlike the others," he explains, emphasising that this trend is true of CFI across campuses in south India. "This dread that they inspire strikes a chord with Muslims who are overly insecure lately, in the current political situation," he adds.

Arndt Emmerich is a postdoctoral researcher at the Max Weber Institute of Sociology, University of Heidelberg. Earlier, while he was a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, he had travelled to India and penned a stimulating book titled *Islamic*

The body of slain ABVP leader Sachin Gopalan

IN THE SAME YEAR WHEN MANMOHAN SINGH RAISED THE ISSUE OF SOUTH INDIAN STATES, ESPECIALLY KERALA, BECOMING A HUB OF ISLAMISM, MEMBERS OF CFI IN KANNUR REPORTEDLY HACKED A 21-YEAR-OLD ABVP ACTIVIST, SACHIN GOPALAN, WHO LATER SUCCUMBED TO KNIFE INJURIES

Movements in India: Moderation and its Discontents, which focused on PFI and its affiliates. He is of the view that CFI and its parent PFI have learnt the art of political mobilisation from multiple sources: the Dravidian movement, the communist parties as well as from SIMI (Students' Islamic Movement of India), some of whose cadres were founders of PFI. Founded in Aligarh in 1977, SIMI has been banned in India since 2001. Although backed by a section of the Islamic clergy when it was launched initially, they soon distanced themselves from SIMI which took political action to the street, and apparently professed the creation of an Islamic state in the country.

True, PFI, for its part, did distance itself from SIMI openly. Emmerich says in his book, "The PFI [in its erstwhile regional avatars] and SIMI coexisted for nearly ten years. During that time SIMI criticised the PFI for promoting a parliamentarian approach for social change. A SIMI supporter in his mid-forties, who worked in Saudi Arabia, expressed his disappointment with the PFI at a wedding celebration in Malappuram in December 2014. He argued that the movement represented a 'distorted legacy of SIMI' by trying to go down the 'parliamentarian route' and to 'change the system from within'. He was upset that the PFI had 'departed from Maududi's teaching and the Islamic principle of the Caliphate', which generated some bemused reactions among the other guests. Former SIMI members, who joined the PFI in the early 1990s, admitted that they learned from 'past mistakes', conceding that SIMI's approach to politics, proclaiming an Islamic state on Indian soil and threatening to kill Hindus, was not sustainable, at least in theory. A PFI student cadre in his early twenties strongly emphasised that 'we cannot support SIMI's ideology.... The propagation of temple bombings by SIMI's radical Madhya Pradesh faction has been a huge mistake.'"

"It is wrong to say that we indoctrinate Muslim students. We do not reject their agency. We merely speak to them about the contemporary political situation and engage in a dialogue"

MS SAJID national president, CFI

Emmerich talks of new forms of collective action pioneered in free India by SIMI, making it different from most traditional Muslim organisations that focused largely on theology and looked up to Congress for political deliverance. Notes the scholar: "Why is CFI different? Because they go beyond seminars and theoretical ways. They themselves concede that they are a physical defence force [like PFI]."

That CFI, like its parent, will seek violent ways to uphold its reputation as a "saviour" of Muslims is amply clear from many incidents, says a senior Kerala police officer who has, for many years, worked in intelligence.

In the same year when Manmohan Singh raised the issue of south Indian states, especially Kerala, becoming a hub of Islamism along with the usual suspects like Jammu and Kashmir and Assam, members of CFI in Kannur reportedly hacked a 21-year-old ABVP activist, Sachin Gopalan, who later succumbed to knife injuries at a Mangaluru hospital. Similarly, there was an attempt on the life of a Sangh worker, Sushil Kumar, in north Kerala who was assaulted with a surgical knife. Although Kumar claimed that CPM was behind the attempt, police figured through *modus operandi* that the perpetrators could be CFI workers. Surgical knives had been used against a Muslim League worker in a previous attack. CFI, according to police and intelligence officials from Kerala and Karnataka, have a propensity for violence to prove that they matter. One of them told *Open*, "When it comes to protecting Muslims and symbols of their faith, CFI, like PFI, will not hesitate to make a loud statement through acts of violence. I see it as a deliberate action on its part to position itself as different from other Muslim organisations [especially the Muslim League in Kerala which is part of the Congress-led United Democratic Front] that sort of cower before dominant parties and the ruling BJP at the Centre."

PFI had planned several such "actions" in the past, he adds, the most heinous being the chopping of the right wrist of Kerala professor TJ Joseph for placing in a Malayalam exam a controversial question seen as an insult to Prophet Muhammad. Most of the 40-plus accused in the case are either workers of PFI or its political outfit, SDPI. So far, the list of crimes attributed to PFI include possession of arms, forced conversions, love jihad, murder, kidnapping, murders, hate campaigns and rioting. PFI, which police say has organised camps to train its volunteers in the use of arms, has often claimed that it will take the legal route to get justice while accusing "fascists in power" of acting with extreme bias towards them.

Police officers say the previous avatar of the PFI in Kerala, called the National Development Front (NDF), launched in 1993 comprising "riff-raff" elements, was reckless in its action. In the mid-1990s, this writer had investigated certain secret activities of NDF that involved indoctrination of teenagers to nearly toeing the SIMI line as both co-existed. But over time, NDF veered more towards accepting the parliamentary line as they realised that they could no longer rely on Congress for meeting the aspirations of the Muslim community. "This was in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 when in the south, the likes of Abdul Nazer Mahdani incited crowds through his fiery speeches. His activities spawned several outfits, some of which wanted to wage a war against the Indian Union. But NDF slowly transformed itself into an organisation that was designed to be there for the long haul," says a senior police officer who has investigated many criminal cases against NDF, and later, PFI.

Emmerich says in his paper titled 'Political Education and Legal Pragmatism of Muslim Organisations in India', hence, the arrival of PFI indicates more internal democratisation and political fragmentation of Muslim minority politics in India. He writes, “Like other political stakeholders that emerged in the past, including Dalit and lower caste parties in the 1980s, the new Muslim organisations and their political parties will try to win support by highlighting the difference between them and the established Muslim elite parties. That is why the PFI is more assertive than traditional Muslim elites and Islamic authorities,” he prophesies. He says that the PFI organisational approach combines political education, legal assistance, court cases, and welfare initiatives. “Members were attracted to the PFI by its assertive language of institutional justice and human rights and by its style of professionalism and discipline, which is different from the culture of obedience of their parents' generation and the inward-looking and ritual-focused ulama. My findings indicate that young cadres and supporters had a heightened sense of agency and self-respect after participating in PFI-led programmes that taught Muslims about their legal rights, including the results of the Sachar Report, and political awareness, where they learned how to defend each other from police discrimination through court cases, petitions, boycotts, and public protests.”

> “They [CFI] combined the sense of adventure with a religious calling. They have also instilled a political rights consciousness among Muslims. That makes the organisation religiously and politically populist”
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> ARNDT EMMERICH researcher, Max Weber Institute of Sociology, University of Heidelberg

CFI, meanwhile, says Emmerich in an interview to *Open*, gave its cadres a sense of adventure as they travelled with other members to Muzaffarnagar and Jammu and Kashmir to help refugees and human rights groups, respectively. “They combined the sense of adventure with a religious calling. They have also instilled a political rights consciousness among Muslims. That makes the organisation religiously and politically populist,” he says.

A senior Bengaluru-based police officer who has probed various crimes of PFI, including murders, says that CFI has the potential to grow faster because of the rising number of Muslim students who travel across the country to get education, and their wish for organisations such as CFI and others to stand up for their rights wherever they are.

Ashwan Sadiq P, the Bengaluru-based CFI general secretary who is an engineering graduate from Mangaluru, says that his organisation represents both the students and the youth. He argues that CFI is demonised because it is in a tireless fight against “fascist right wing Hindutva forces”. Using expressions such as “necropolitical machinations” and “genocidal attacks”, he notes that he is least bothered about the projection of CFI as a terrorist entity because “the people know what is the truth and what our work is.” “Over the past 12 years, we have intervened in most issues that trampled upon individual and collective rights of the marginalised,” he says.

Like him, MS Sajid, national president of CFI, talks with a meditative calm. “It is wrong to say that we indoctrinate Muslim students. We do not reject their agency. We merely speak to them about the contemporary political situation and engage in a dialogue. By the way, it is not just the Muslims who are facing the brunt of state repression. Human rights activists and dissenters are all being victimised. We are confident of overcoming this crisis, and at the same time, we are not ready to relent in our fight against communal forces,” he says, adding that the rise of CFI to prominence is thanks to a raft of reasons, including the vacuum created by the so-called secular forces who refused to take a strong stance against majoritarianism.

The proof of the rage of CFI is its website where the organisation dwells at length on a range of issues. For instance, it has even spotlighted the National Medical Council's suggestion that doctors take the “Charak Shapath” instead of the Hippocratic Oath, calling it “saffronisation” that degrades medical ethics. It had earlier hit out at the University Grants Commission's circular urging the students to practise “Surya Namaskar” on the occasion of Republic Day, alleging politicisation of a concept that the rest of the world has embraced. There is also a letter on the site addressed to Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg over inaction on hate speech in India on his company's social media platform, Facebook.

Academic and historian Ashraf Kadakkal feels that the rise of CFI as a formidable force, especially on south Indian and many central university campuses and minority institutions, is an outcome of the efforts by even secular parties to make their Muslim leaders invisible, and the ongoing efforts to discredit Islam and its adherents. He says that he is unconcerned about the jurisprudence aspect of the *hijab* being essential to Muslims. On the other hand, he sees it as a symptom of the pathology of Islamophobia. “At this juncture, whichever organisation stands up for the right of Muslims, will naturally have a following,”

AFP

The principal of a college talks to *hijab*-wearing students at Kundapur in Udupi district of Karnataka, February 7

he notes, and adds that he is more worried about the likes of the Jamaat-e-Islami radicalising youth than CFI. Meanwhile, EM Abdul Rahiman, vice-chairman, PFI, too, tells *Open* that the *hijab* row is not an isolated issue, but the latest in the series. "For Hindutva, which is not a religious belief but a political agenda of hatred, every sign of Muslim identity is a threat to be eliminated," he says.

While CFI earns praise from certain quarters, it is seen as a "two-faced" organisation that projects a "democratic front office" and hides "devious designs" by intelligence agencies and forces. Like PFI, young Muslims look up to it as a "cool" outfit in tune with the times—many of its leaders enjoy Western music, dress up in designer wear, watch trending movies and travel to exotic locations. Agencies see them as those who worship the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah, besides other transnational Islamist bodies like the Muslim Brotherhood under Mohamed Morsi.

As Emmerich explains with élan in his book, IB officials he met during his research stick to the argument that the ghost of SIMI continues to haunt PFI and its affiliates, like CFI. "Since SIMI is banned, the members work in different outfits" is the argument among federal agencies.

After a series of setbacks over violent actions, CFI and PFI have managed to be back in the limelight as the protector of Muslim dignity.

Emmerich quotes in his book a PFI leader who justifies the assertive public posture of PFI and its affiliates: "There is nothing wrong with being physical. It attracts the youngsters. No other organisation is ready to fight fascism in the way we do it. Our argument is that you cannot fight fascism only through seminars, symposia and conferences. Sometimes, it happens that you have to stop them on the streets, like in Gujarat and other states in India where RSS started rioting, raping our women and burning our children alive. In a country where the police and the security forces are not in a position to support and defend you, you are allowed to have private defence, which is not illegal. You cannot take law into your own hands, but at the same time, if your survival is at stake, it is a fundamental right to defend yourself and every other human being."

A Thiruvananthapuram-based former senior police officer sums up in response to the query as to why CFI is finding traction among Muslim students and youth: "Hardline ideologies always have a special appeal." ■

FRANCE SHOWS THE WAY

FROM THE 2011 VEIL BAN LAW TO THE RECENT SENATE VOTE ON THE HIJAB, THE FRENCH REMAIN INSTITUTIONALLY AND INSTINCTIVELY COMMITTED TO LAÏCITÉ, THE ORIGINAL MODEL OF SECULARISM

| **By SUDEEP PAUL** |

GETTY IMAGES

REUTERS

Kenza Drider addresses the media in a protest against the veil ban outside Cathédrale Notre-Dame in Paris, April 11, 2011; (inset) Police escort protestors against the ban outside Notre-Dame, April 11, 2011

M**onday, April 11th, 2011 was a sunny** day in Paris with intimations of spring. The Seine looked blue from any bridge, the temperature in the mid-twenties was pleasant, and the cruise boats were full. But there was an advisory about avoiding the vicinity of Notre-Dame. It was the day the Act Prohibiting the Concealing of the Face in Public (passed on October 11th, 2010) was to come into force and a protest was expected in and around the Île de la Cité. Two women would be arrested that day for participating in the unauthorised protest. They did not quite make history—which they would have, had they been detained under the colloquially called "veil ban law". But it was a historic day. More than five years after the riots of 2005 in the *banlieues* and with four years still to go for the beginning of the serial wrecking of Paris—from the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in January 2015 followed by the Bataclan in November and subsequently the *gilets jaunes* protests through the rioting after the 2018 World Cup final—that incident near Notre-Dame, its cause and its consequences were a big deal. But first, the backstory.

Did the clergy fall or did the laity rise? The 1958 constitution on which rests the Fifth Republic, calls France "*une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale* (an indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic)". The 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and State made in the Third Republic never used the much-revered, much-abused and much more misunderstood word "*laïcité*". That law, however, marks the beginning of France's grappling with the problem of religion in the 20th and 21st centuries when it fully separated state and church, legally prohibiting the state from recognising any religion, let alone using its coffers to fund one.

IF WE SEE *LAÏCITÉ* AS EMPOWERING, THEN NOT ONLY DOES IT KEEP PUBLIC OFFICES FREE OF RELIGIOUS INTERFERENCE BUT IT ALSO PROTECTS MINORITIES BY LINKING THE ABSENCE OF STATE RELIGION AND THE STATE'S DISTANCING FROM RELIGION TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT WHICH WOULD NATURALLY EXTEND TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN PRIVATE

Laïcité, of course, goes a long way back. In perhaps one of the most remarkable processes of re-definition after the Revolution of 1789-99, a word which was little different in its import from the English "laity" came to mean keeping the church (or religion) out of and away from government. The rationale was to protect public institutions from the influence of religion while also ensuring governmental non-interference in matters of religion, an essentially private matter for every citizen—except when a religious issue impinged on public order and the life of citizens in the Republic. But the 1905 law did not make *laïcité* a legally enforceable principle since it did not even use the term. That elevation was left to the ill-fated Fourth Republic and the Constitution of 1946. Yet, even after World War II, *laïcité* was left practically undefined from a legal perspective which, however, did not make it 'meaningless'.

Laïcité, in the aftermath of the Revolution and then from the early 20th century through the first five decades of the Fifth Republic, was steadily valorised to become synonymous with the distinctiveness of French national identity, so much so that any compromise on it was seen as tantamount to negating the idea of France itself. (The separation of church and state does not apply to Alsace-Moselle, formerly Alsace-Lorraine, which was part of Germany since 1871 and did not return to France until 1918.) *Laïcité* does not infringe on the right of the individual to freely practise his or her religion and is, in principle, meant to preserve that right by keeping the state's nose out of it. And yet, the debate on *laïcité* within French society has hinged on this point, both in the contemporary context of multi-religious democratic Western societies as well as the more historical, and specifically Catholic, question of anti-clericalism.

If we see *laïcité* as positive and empowering, then not only does it keep public offices free of religious interference and the state unbiased (in today's heterogeneous French society) but it also protects minorities by linking the absence of state religion and the state's distancing from religion to freedom of thought which would naturally extend to freedom of religion. In the older context, going back to the beginning, this would mean an *absence*—of either state or church from the space of the other—thereby differentiating *laïcité* from the anti-clericalism that too had marked the revolt against the Church of Rome. This is the biggest strength of the 'French model' of secularism. It is, arguably, also its biggest weakness which critics and opponents of *laïcité* in practice have traditionally pounced on to point at its constraints on the free observance of religion and also its actual hostility to religion and, originally, the church, thus being a disguised form of anti-clericalism bequeathed to republican France by the Revolution. From this perspective, *laïcité* is negative and restrictive.

The trigger that reignited the debate, a little more than a decade ago, was pulled by Nicolas Sarkozy. The man who, as interior minister, had handled the 2005 riots believed the time had come for a little generosity towards religion and acknowledging its contribution to French history. If faith were to be partially allowed into the public space and discourse, perhaps the government—which recognised religious organisations but not religions—too could subsidise some religious groups?

President Sarkozy's advocacy of a new "positive *laïcité*" found its most significant endorser in Pope Benedict XVI. And the man who had established the Fifth Republic in October 1958, Charles de Gaulle, twice saviour of France, had been publicly proud of France's Christian heritage. But then, in early 2010, two criminals in *burqa*s walked in and held up a post office at gunpoint. Sarkozy, who had already started voicing his reservations about the *burqa* and face-covering veils—his reopening of the debate was being opposed by private citizens, most of his own UMP and the Socialists, as well as various religious bodies—turned around and blessed the law prohibiting the covering of the face in public that was passed on October 11th, 2010 with overwhelming support from both sides of the political divide. It would come into effect on April 11th, 2011, with the six-month reprieve to be used for a public awareness campaign.

On April 11th, 2011, I had spent most of the day at Quai d'Orsay (metonym for the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs) and its vicinity, always at a stone's throw from Notre-Dame but missing the most dramatic moments of the action. Asked to write on the *débat du jour* by the newspaper I worked for at the time, I spoke to bureaucrats at hand (including a top Sarkozy advisor at the Élysée whose name could not be disclosed then as offering an opinion on the law), legal professionals, students at Place Saint-Michel near the Sorbonne, as well as North African shop assistants in the 18th arrondissement. Retrieving my old notes (I never throw any paper away), what strikes me is the sincerity and naïveté verging on innocence of my interviewees who, like me, had little inkling as to the horrors that would unfold over the decade. The debate has moved much further and yet, the continued resistance to compromise on *laïcité* in France has kept them almost as relevant today as in 2011. A couple of these I am reproducing but only in their already-printed form.

Gabrielle, lawyer and feminist: "If one goes to southern France, one finds men in swimming trunks but the women covered up. Is this hideousness individual choice? If you leave it to choice, it's the men who decide. That's what happens in Britain. The British multicultural model was praised when we had our riots in 2005. Not anymore. Such punishment on women doesn't square with French values. Some amount of integration helps immigrants' children mix in society. That's why immigrants are taught French! The veil is an enormous problem for integration. As a woman, I don't believe any woman would choose it. This is the position of most thinking women in France."

Rachid and Fayçal, shop assistants: "The veil ban is a manufactured issue. Crime in the *banlieues*? That's unemployment. They won't give us decent jobs. We don't care about this law because ban or no ban, it's not going to make any difference to our lives."

In 2011, the Left hadn't yet wholly repositioned itself on identity and the *banlieues* were still concerned about money and jobs. The controversy never came close to what happened after the French Senate voted to prohibit girls under 18 wearing the *hijab* in public in April 2021 (10 years after the veil ban).

Later in the day on April 11th, a young woman was fined €150 for keeping her face covered while entering a shop, becoming the first statistic under the law. As explained to the public, the law had three premises. One, liberty and gender equality: women concealing their face are prevented from socialising freely, failing to relate to other citizens, and being forced into exclusion from social life. This directly violated the French constitution on gender equality. Two, public security: the prohibition on covering one's face at

Olivier Roy

Gilles Kepel

Nicolas Sarkozy

THE TRIGGER THAT REIGNITED THE DEBATE WAS PULLED BY NICOLAS SARKOZY. MOST FRENCH CITIZENS, LIKE THE GOVERNMENT, WERE BOTHERED BY RELIGIOUS OSTENTATION IN PUBLIC. AN INDIRECT LEGACY OF THE LAW IS AN INTELLECTUAL BATTLE. IT WOULD EVENTUALLY LEAD TO THE PUBLIC FEUD BETWEEN GILLES KEPEL AND OLIVIER ROY airports, exam halls, courts, poll booths, etcetera had preceded the 'veil ban'. (In subsequent years, especially after the Nice attack of July 2016, further prohibitions came into force, culminating in the Senate's headscarves ban in sport in January 2022.) Three, public order: the French would call upon their republican social pact and its inclusion of the rules of sociability and social intercourse.

In 2011, it was also argued by the Socialists that Sarkozy was pushing farther right because of the threat from Marine le Pen. After all, very few women in France, which had Western Europe's largest Muslim population at the time, reportedly wore a face-covering veil although the government estimated the number to be almost 2,000. But that remained, in retrospect, a matter of political point scoring since most French citizens, like the government, were bothered by religious ostentation in public. Ironically, the veil ban was based not on *laïcité* but free social intercourse, equality and security. The police were not looking for every headscarf, just the *burqa* and the *niqab* that concealed the face. Even the French Council of the Muslim Faith had declared its provisions general and not targeted at Islam.

The ground has been blown up from under France and Europe since 2011 through terror and the mass arrival of refugees. An indirect legacy of the law is an intellectual battle. It would eventually trigger the public feud between Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy.

IRONICALLY, THE 2011 VEIL BAN WAS BASED NOT ON *LAÏCITÉ* BUT FREE SOCIAL INTERCOURSE, EQUALITY AND SECURITY. EVEN THE FRENCH COUNCIL OF THE MUSLIM FAITH HAD DECLARED ITS PROVISIONS GENERAL AND NOT TARGETED AT ISLAM. THINGS NEVER CAME CLOSE TO WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE FRENCH SENATE VOTED TO PROHIBIT GIRLS UNDER 18 WEARING THE *HIJAB* IN PUBLIC IN 2021

Olivier Roy's ***Globalized Islam: The Search*** *for a New Ummah* (2006) argued that it's not Islam that has been radicalised but rather radicalism that has been Islamised, that radical youth were predisposed to radicalism and the history of Islamic fundamentalism in the West had to seen against the backdrop of youth radicalism. From that perspective, even the *Charlie Hebdo* or Bataclan attack would have to be seen in continuation from, say, the Red Brigade in Italy or the Baader-Meinhof Gang in West Germany. Moreover, Roy blamed the burkini and veil bans in particular and *laïcité* as a whole for the hardening of Muslim opinion, provoking violence. This line of argument tied in rather neatly with his other idea that "re-Islamisation" is an attempt by Muslim minorities in non-Islamic Western societies to assert their identity. It's not an exaggeration to say this is the essential, revised leftist position, put in place long before official wokeism.

Gilles Kepel, the author of *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (2000) and the more recent *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West* (2017), whose *Jihad* looked at the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s in the Middle East, has argued that the Islamist objective of establishing a global caliphate is based on a strict reading of the Quran. What Kepel called a "Salafi *Volksgemeinschaft*" would only lead to violence since it could not reconcile itself with the democratic West. The clash engendered by such "en-trenched Salafism" ultimately aims to destroy Europe by inflicting on it a civil war. In an interview with Israeli daily *Haaretz* in June 2017, Kepel said: "Roy's theory on the Islamification of radicalism is the theory of someone who does not speak Arabic and does not look into the relation between jihadi actions and the Salafi doctrine behind them... The real challenge lies in understanding the radicalization of Islam and its connection to terrorism." In response to Roy's claim that "oversecularization" of France and Western society, by marginalising religion, had exposed the faithful to fundamentalism, Kepel countered: "Britain, they said, remains untouched thanks to a greater tolerance of religion. Now look what happened: France hasn't been attacked in eight months, while Britain is constantly targeted." (The reference was to the Westminster and London Bridge attacks of March and June 2017.)

Kepel has called terror in France a "retro-colonial resentment" that affects youth already socially isolated, a condition worsened by the financial crisis. But he also extends this to the UK: "Its imperial past in the Indian subcontinent, and particularly the situation they left in Kashmir, has an impact on local patterns of radicalization." In *Terror in France*, Kepel draws the updated battlelines: "...after the banlieues riots of 2005, the UOIF [Union des organisations islamiques de France] has since suffered strong competition from the Salafist movement in the battle for French Muslim minds. This "total" (in French, *intégrale*) view of the Muslim religion relies on a grand narrative promoting cultural separation from "infidel" French society. It recruits primarily among disenfranchised young people in the banlieues, where that blend of "total" Islam has become not only the norm in many places, multiplying ostensible markers in the urban fabric, but also a portentous *habitus* for their residents."

The events of 2012-18, beginning with Mohammed Merah in Toulouse, have shaken the foundations of French secular republicanism. But for all the bloodbaths, diluting *laïcité* has never been on the cards. For, *laïcité* is France. Unbiased (or equally biased) and non-discriminatory (the veil ban was not about Islam), *laïcité* has not meant the laity, who would still be people of the church, for a long time. For all its flaws and allegations of Islamophobia, the French model remains, in theory, perhaps the fairest of them all. ■

HAUTE HIJAB

WHEN IT'S A FASHION STATEMENT

| **By LHENDUP G BHUTIA** |

When Ayesha Nawab returned home to Chennai, nearly five years after leaving for Australia, she looked visibly different. She had begun to wear a *hijab*. "It was the reverse," she jokes. "People leave home for the West and lose their culture. I had found mine."

Nawab, who had never won the *hijab* previously, was drawn to it when, while pursuing a pilot training programme, she began to work part-time at a popular fashion boutique catering to Muslims (Hijab House). One day during Ramzan, more than a year since she began working at the boutique, she decided she would begin wearing the *hijab*. "When I told Tarik (Houchar, the proprietor), 'I think I am ready for it,' he was like 'Are you sure? It's a pretty big step. You're going to be your own person. But the world will see you with a completely different set of eyes,'" she recalls.

The world didn't look at her all that differently, she says. There were the occasional stares and stray comments. Even her friends in India were taken aback initially, with many probably taking her wearing the *hijab* as a sign of a newfound religious conservatism. But eventually, everyone realised that she remained the same.

More than 10 years later, Nawab is among the most popular *hijab*-wearing fashion bloggers in India. Matching her stylish *hijabs* with her #OOTD (outfit of the day), which can range from vintage *saris* to *salwar kameezes* her grandmother stitched for her mother, from skirts, pink blazers, to a pair of trendy bellbottoms, and always with a range of accessories, sunglasses, and little bags, Nawab's Instagram account is part of a growing trend among modern Muslim women in India, who are embracing the *hijab* and also modernising it.

Not so far away from the *hijab* row building up in Karnataka, and its associated concerns about women being oppressed and made to wear the *hijab*, individuals like Nawab, fashion designers, independent labels, and social media influencers of what is known as modest fashion, are showing that the *hijab*, while staying within the tenets of prescribed modesty, can be both fun and fashionable, and in no way an impediment for a modern Muslim woman going about her life. "The *hijab* is beautiful and never a sign of oppression. It is actually really fun," Nawab says. "Everyone has a different way of wearing the *hijab*. There is so much you can do with it."

Muneeba Nadeem, a fashion designer who runs an independent label under her own name in Kanpur, specialises in what is known as modest fashion. In this category, the aim of the outfit, as the name suggests, is on modesty, where the wearer's body shape is concealed and exposure limited, while making it fashionable. In 2019, when she was a student at the International Institute of Fashion Design in Kanpur, she presented what is believed to be the first collection of clothes featuring the *hijab* at a major fashion event in India. Showing her collection at the Lakmé Fashion Week (LFW), the *hijab* was paired with skirts, saris and jumpsuits. "The aim was to show that the *hijab* can be fashionable," she says.

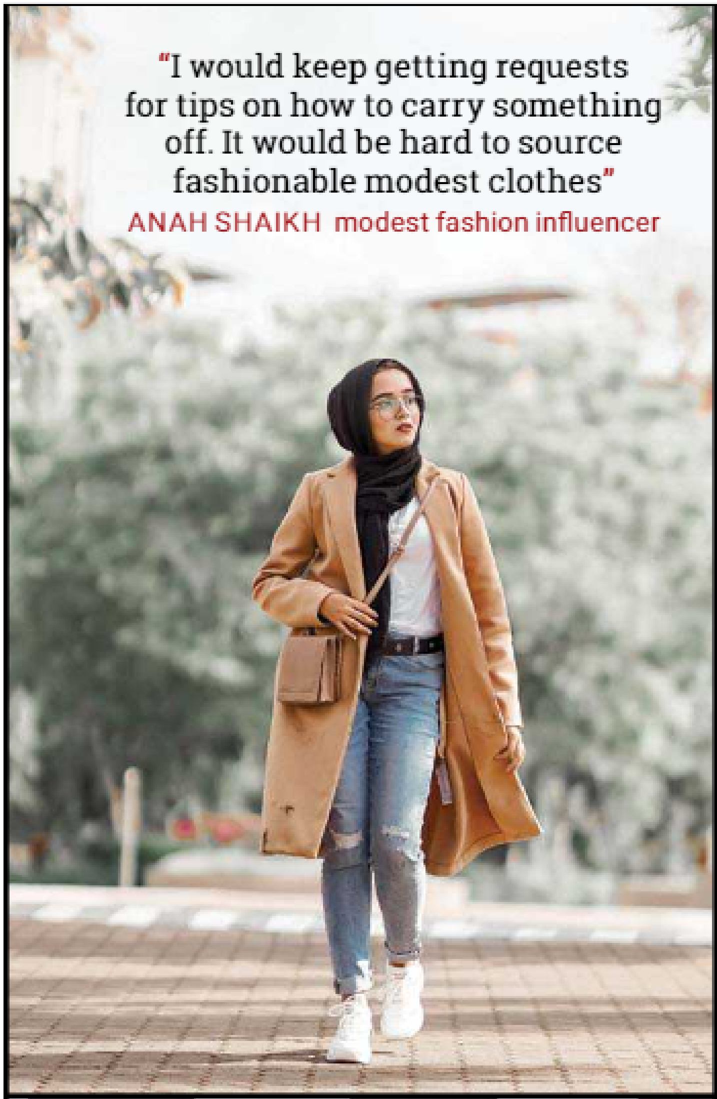
Nadeem wears the *hijab*, and sometimes the *burqa*, depending on the situation. While remaining true to her faith, she has never allowed its conservative interpretation to stop her from pursuing her interests and goals. Always interested in fashion, she joined a fashion institute, and even though she knows many of her classmates felt she would probably get married and drop out, she continues to pursue a career in fashion. When she began exhibiting her work, a relative once told her father that working in the fashion industry was not Islamic. But her father, showing her work at LFW, retorted, how was wearing the *hijab* wrong.

The *hijab* collection at LFW was her way of showing, she says, that Islamic wear can have space within fashion. "In our [fashion] community, exposure is seen as fashion. What I wear is not supposed to be fashion. So, it was a way of saying yes, we have limits; yes, we have to wear the *hijab*. But that can be fashion too," she says.

When she interned at the LFW in 2018, and then presented her collection the following year, she was the only woman who was wearing a *hijab*. "I was very nervous. My show was in the fifth round. The models who had done the earlier four rounds in very different clothes, now returned wearing the *hijab* and looking completely different," she says. According to her, while her faith prescribes certain boundaries around clothing, nowhere is it said it has to be unfashionable. "Of course, you can carry the *hijab* with style," she says.

The Muslim community in India is often seen as one large monolithic block where education and income levels are low, women uniformly oppressed, and conservatism is rampant. But as the makeover of the *hijab* suggests, that is far from the truth. More and more women, like those in other communities, are getting educated and joining the workforce. Income levels are growing, urbanisation is occurring, and aspirations and fashion trends are expanding.

A variety of businesses, from independent labels and Instagram-operated influencer-pushed fashion to some larger



"I would keep getting requests for tips on how to carry something off. It would be hard to source fashionable modest clothes"

ANAH SHAIKH modest fashion influencer

LAKMĒ FASHION WEEK
NEXA

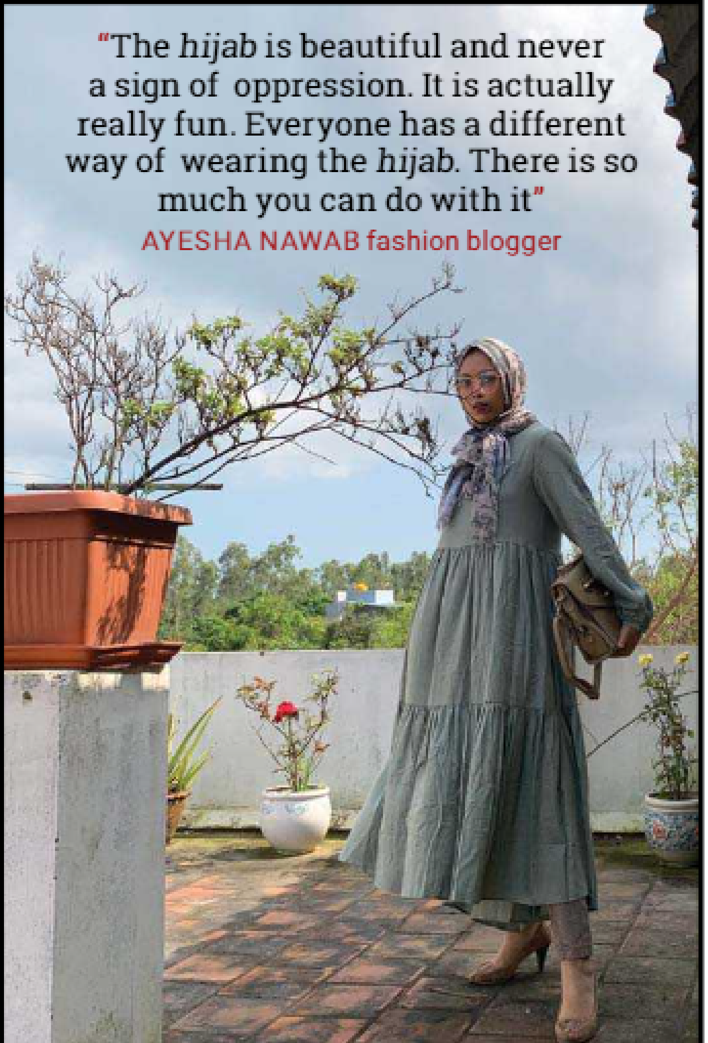
"What I wear is not supposed to be fashion. So, it was a way of saying yes, we have limits; yes, we have to wear the *hijab*. But that can be fashion too"

MUNEEBA NADEEM fashion designer

"In my experience, the moment you tell a youngster that she is compelled to wear something, that is the day she stops wearing it"

SHANAZ RUKSHANA

founder, The Hijab Company



"The *hijab* is beautiful and never a sign of oppression. It is actually really fun. Everyone has a different way of wearing the *hijab*. There is so much you can do with it"

AYESHA NAWAB fashion blogger

brands, are trying to cater to this growing demand in fashionable Islamic wear. Mushkiya, a chain of stores focusing on fashionable Islamic clothes, is expanding rapidly. According to one employee at their main store in Delhi, there are a total of nine outlets across Mumbai and Delhi. Another franchise-based modest fashion brand, Islamic Design House (IDH), that has multiple stores across many countries and whose stated motto is to bring faith, fun and fashion together, started operations in India a few years ago. And then there are the many popular independent brands, from That Adorbs Hijab to Little Black Hijab. According to Shanaz Rukshana, the founder of The Hijab Company, another popular independent modest fashion brand that sells both online and through a store in Chennai, the idea of such a business came to her from the difficulties she experienced in finding clothes that while modest, remained stylish. “I had started sourcing fabric and making clothes for myself and my family. And then slowly my friends started asking me for them, and placing orders. It just grew like that and by 2017, I officially launched The Hijab Company,” she says. According to her, modest fashion for Muslim women is growing in India and catching up with the trend among Muslims elsewhere in the world.

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

FASHION DESIGNERS, INDEPENDENT LABELS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS OF WHAT IS KNOWN AS MODEST FASHION, ARE SHOWING THAT THE *HIJAB*, WHILE STAYING WITHIN THE TENETS OF PRESCRIBED MODESTY, CAN BE BOTH FUN AND FASHIONABLE

Rukshana began to wear the *hijab* herself during the time her interest in the Islamic faith grew, and she started pursuing Islamic Studies at an institute. Today, she does not wear the *hijab* all the time. “And that's fine. Because for me, it is a choice. I'm not obliged to do it,” she says. “In my experience, the moment you tell a youngster that she is compelled to wear something, that is the day she stops wearing it.”

Some may interpret the Islamic faith's prescriptions on modesty to be a diktat against any form of fashion. But many young women contend that modesty does not limit women from wearing something modestly, yet stylishly. This is most visible on social media. The social media landscape and its influencer culture may be saturated with youths who dress provocatively. But another cohort of influencers, ones who are into modest fashion, is claiming its own space in the digital fashion real estate.

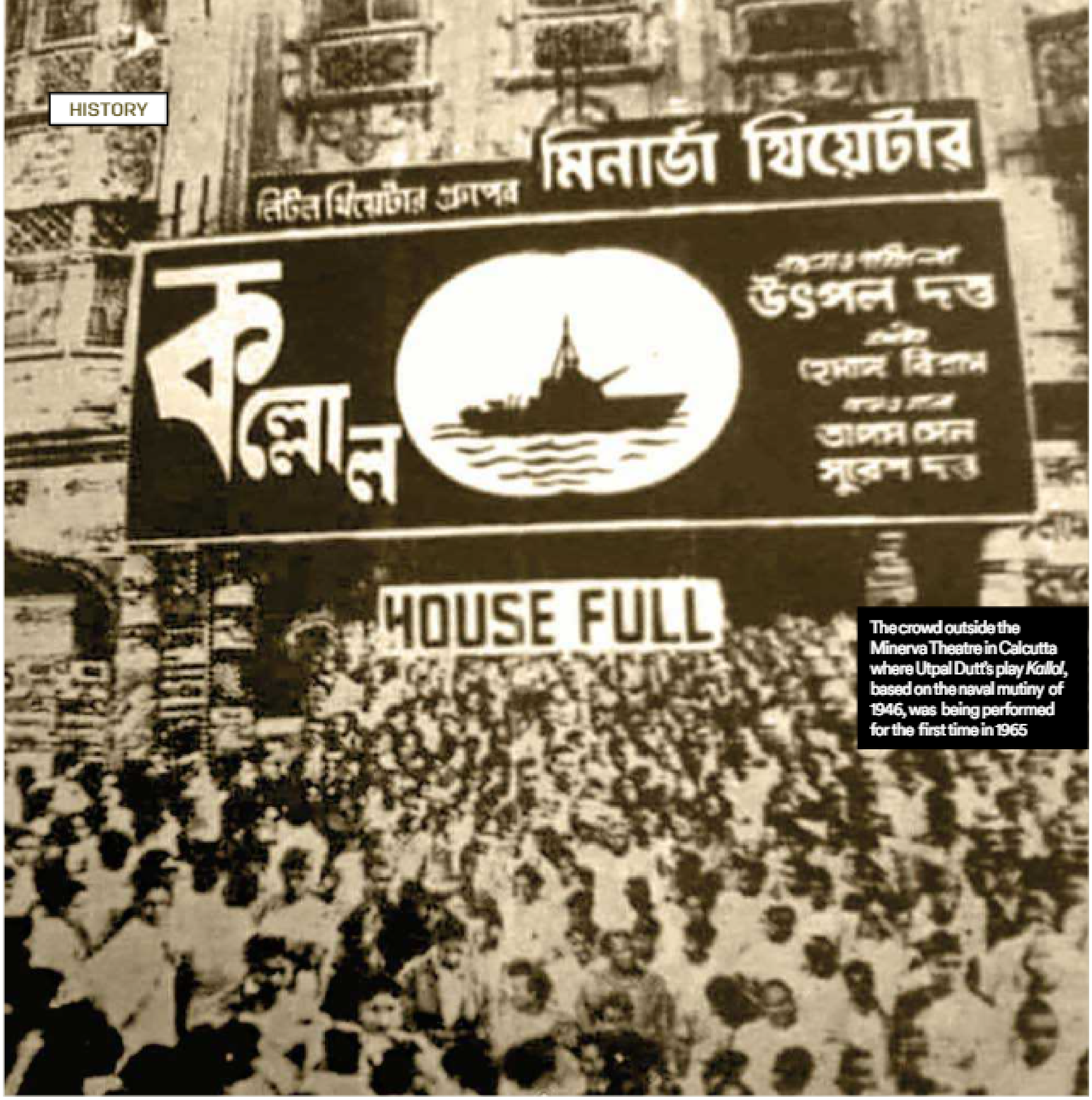
Anah Shaikh, with nearly 6.5 lakh followers on Instagram, is probably the most popular modest fashion influencer in the country. She is sought after by multiple brands, both international and Indian, for promotions. Some of these are modest fashion brands themselves, but many times, like the Chinese fast fashion brand Shein or Katrina Kaif's cosmetic brand Kay Beauty, these are brands using her influence to reach a growing demography. Shaikh has now also launched her own line of modest fashion clothing.

Shaikh's followers on social media began to grow rapidly when she began to document her fashion style and handing out fashion tips. “I would keep getting requests for tips on how to carry something off. It would be hard to source fashionable modest clothes, and I would show them how they could buy regular brands and pair them with something that made it appropriately modest,” she says.

But there remain difficulties. While they often encounter those online who claim their choice of clothes, however fashionable, continues to remain a symbol of oppression, there are also conservative elements within their own faith who say they are pushing the boundaries of what is Islamic. Shaikh recalls how her father, when he was away in Saudi Arabia, was told by someone scandalously that her daughter was modelling. “Everyone is on a different journey with their faith. I am on mine. And someone else is on theirs. No point pushing their views on to mine,” she says.

Nawab has faced some resistance herself. Before she left for Australia, when she applied for a part-time job for the ground staff of an airline in India and appeared wearing a *dupatta* around her head, she was asked if she would be willing to drop its use. More recently, despite having cleared multiple rounds of interview for a teaching job in an international school in Chennai, and becoming more or less certain for the job once her demo class went through successfully, she was later asked if she would continue wearing the *hijab*. After she said she would and saw no way how this would interfere in the way she performed her job, she got an email saying someone else had been selected for the job.

And then there are the occasional comments on Instagram telling her what she is doing is not Islamic. “Some of them are like you are not supposed to be seen outside. But most followers are very supportive,” she says. “Just the other day, I posted something, and everyone was like ‘Wow, that's so nice.’ And then there was one person who said, ‘At least, you could have ironed it,’” she says.■



The crowd outside the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta where Utpal Dutt's play *Kallol*, based on the naval mutiny of 1946, was being performed for the first time in 1965

THE POLITICAL WAR OVER 1946

On the anniversary of the naval mutiny, remembering how Utpal Dutt's 1965 play memorialising the event had landed him in jail

By PRAMOD KAPOOR

ON FEBRUARY 18TH, 1946, sailors or ratings of the Royal Indian Navy mutinied. They were inspired by the heroism of the Azad Hind Fauj. But their anger was sparked by terrible service conditions, racism, and broken recruitment promises. In less than 48 hours, 20,000 men took over 78 ships and 21 shore establishments, and replaced British flags with the entwined flags of Congress, the Muslim League and the communists.

The British panicked and announced a Cabinet Mission to discuss the modalities of transfer of power. Indian troops refused to fire on the ratings, and the mutiny sparked revolts in other branches of the armed forces. People who thronged the streets of Bombay in support were incessantly fired upon resulting in over 400 deaths and 1,500 injured.

To quell the rebellion, the British commanded the powerful warship *HMS Glasgow* to sail rapidly and ordered low sorties by RAF fighter planes. In retaliation, the ratings trained the guns mounted on the captured ships towards the shore, threatening to blow the Gateway of India, Yacht Club and the dockyards.

As violence escalated, angry telegrams flew between the British prime minister and the viceroy's office. While the communists flamed the ratings, Congress and the League pushed them to surrender, promising they would not be victimised. Shamefully, even after Independence the governments of India and Pakistan refused to honour those promises.

The mutiny caused public disagreements between Gandhiji and Aruna Asaf Ali, and between Sardar Patel and Nehru. As the last war of independence it hastened the transfer of power. Yet, this seminal event, which inspired songs, art and theatre, has been edited out of the popular narratives of the freedom movement.

Congress, under Chief Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen, ruled West Bengal at the time, and even 20 years after the actual event, the party tried to stall the production. They did not have the courage to ban it. But there were attempts to disrupt it by throwing bombs and sending goons to prevent people from entering the hall

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ON MARCH 29TH, 1965, a Bengali play by Utpal Dutt, *Kallol* (literally "commotion" or "hubbub") hit the boards at the legendary Minerva Theatre, on Beadon Street in North Calcutta. Dutt, a staunch communist, had dramatised the naval mutiny of 1946, taking it upon himself to act the part of Rear-Admiral Sir Arthur Rullion Rattray, Flag Officer Commanding, Bombay, who was one of the villains of the piece. The legendary Tapas Sen was director of lighting and Samir Majumdar, the assistant director.

The play lived up to its name as thousands lined up for tickets, causing pandemonium. Every show was a full-house. Majumdar recalls: "It was one of the finest productions. Utpal Dutt had created a wonder, the ship *HMIS Khyber*, was shown sailing in water on the stage."

The play was highly critical of the role played by Congress and the Muslim League, depicting famous politicians as duplicitous, and highlighting their role in persuading the young, nationalistic ratings to surrender. Dutt had deployed his gifts of satire masterfully, ridiculing stalwarts like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

Congress, under Chief Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen, ruled West Bengal at the time, and even 20 years after the actual event, the party tried to stall the production. They did not have the courage to ban it. But there were attempts to disrupt it by throwing bombs and sending goons to prevent people from entering the hall. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, countered this by putting a ring of volunteers around the venue to ensure smooth entry.

In his book, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*, Dutt later wrote, "Workers from the factories and students of several colleges took turns to stand guard outside the theatre... Youth Congress strongmen who had come prepared to attack the theatre, beat a hasty retreat seeing the CPM *bandobast*. Comrade Subhash Chakraborty (later sports minister of West Bengal) led the protecting volunteers at Minerva...

"Under pressure from Congress, no newspaper or periodical published news or reviews. The theatre critic of *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (ABP), a pro-Congress paper, bought tickets and smuggled himself in. ABP wove a review centred around one question: Why has the play not been banned immediately? But as the crowds at the box office grew larger and larger, ABP lost its sangfroid and wrote an editorial, calling for a social boycott of the actors and technicians."

The Statesman was the only newspaper that praised the play in its review. It also published a sarcastic opinion piece headlined 'The Mutiny on Beadon Street'. Dutt writes, "One day, all newspapers excluding the *Statesman*, refused to print our advertisements. That they were acting in concert and under instructions from the Congress bosses and police chiefs was obvious to all."

To counter the absence of media, CPM volunteers made posters and pasted them across Calcutta. Some of these read in Bengali, "*Apni kon dol ey—jara Kallol dekhechhey na jara Kallol dekheini*", which roughly translates as "On which team are you—those who have seen *Kallol* or those who haven't?"

Street corners across Bengal boldly displayed posters saying "*Cholchhe, Cholbe*"—whatever is happening, will carry on happening—in an apparent reference to attempts to stop the play. That slogan has since been used in every, yes every, sort of demonstration in Bengal. *Cholchhe, Cholbe* in Bengal became like *Inquilab Zindabad* elsewhere.

Dutt was arrested in September 1965. He was picked up in a midnight raid and detained without trial in the Presidency Jail. He was only released in March 1966, in an event celebrated with much fanfare and a special performance of the play.

But while Congress did not succeed in bringing down the curtain on *Kallol*, it did succeed, over the decades, in downplaying mentions of one of the most important and seminal events of the independence struggle. Instead of being enshrined in public memory alongside the Salt March, Jallianwala Bagh, etcetera, the naval mutiny of 1946 tends to be relegated to just a footnote, except in scholarly works written by historians, for the benefit of other historians.

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DESPITE THE DISDAIN shown by the political class, the ratings were openly supported by the common man and by the intelligentsia. Creative groups, largely Left-leaning, aligned themselves openly with the strikers. Despite the official disapproval, echoes of the mutiny seeped into literature, art and culture.

The Indian People's Theatre Association or IPTA had been formed in 1943, three years before the naval uprising. The IPTA was at the forefront of communicating the spirit of freedom through its cultural prism. The founding members included Utpal Dutt, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Balraj Sahni, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ritwik Ghatak, Salil Chowdhury and Prithviraj Kapoor.

The play was highly critical of the role played by Congress and the Muslim League, depicting famous politicians as duplicitous, and highlighting their role in persuading the young ratings to surrender. Dutt had deployed his gifts of satire masterfully, ridiculing stalwarts like Nehru and Sardar Patel

They not only supported the Ex-Services Association as a group but also lent their individual voices in support of the mutiny. In Karachi, AK Hangal was arrested for protesting against the firing on the sailors. The famous artist Chittaprosad (whose painting is used as the cover of this book) displayed his paintings at a rally supporting the strikers. His ink drawings and prints on the mutiny were profusely used by the Communist Party paper, the *People's Age*.

Salil Chowdhury's '*Dheu Utchchhe, Kara Tutchhe* (The waves of freedom are rising. The shackles of bondage and slavery are starting to crack)', the song written in July 1946, barely four months after the mutiny, resonates even 75 years later.

One of the most poignant episodes during the naval uprising was the sight of ratings with their heads covered in white shrouds after taking control of the ship *HMIS Kathiawar*, and reciting Josh Malihabadi's famous lines:

Kaam hai mera taghyur, naam hai mera shabab,
Mera Naara, Inquilab, Inquilab, Inquilab…
(My mission is change, my name is youthfulness/
My slogan is Revolution, Revolution, Revolution)

Sahir Ludhianvi also wrote powerful verses about the uprising:

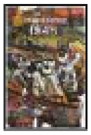
Yeh jalte hue ghar kiske hain, yeh kat te hue tan kiske hain,
Takseem ke andhe toofan mein, Lut te hue gulshan kiske hain,
Badbakht phizayen kiski hain, barbad nashe man kiske hain,
Kuchh ham bhi sune, humko bhi suna, Ye rahkar-e-mulk-o-kaum bata, Yeh kiska lahu hai kaun mara.
Woh kaun sa jazba tha jis se, Farsuda-e-Nizame jeest hila,
Jhulse hue veeran gulshan mein, ek aas ummeed ka phool khila,
janata ka lahoo faujon se mila. Faujon ka lahu janata se mila.
(What passion it was that made a moth-eaten system quiver/
What passion it was that caused a flower of hope to bloom in this dreary desiccated land / What passion it was that mingled the blood of people with the armies, the blood of armies with the masses.)

The naval mutiny is also referenced in *Bhowani Junction*, a famous novel later turned into a multi-starrer movie, written by John Masters, a British Indian Army officer. Salman Rushdie, in his novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* also devoted a large chunk to the mutiny. Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* wonderfully details how young sons of peasants joined the navy at the beginning of World War II and then rebelled.

Utpal Dutt was so proud of the play, he named his home Kallol. The play ran for a record 850 shows. According to Samik Bandhopadhyay, a close associate and friend of Dutt, "A massive rally was held at the *Maidan* (after he was released). A special stage was set up to show a truncated version of *Kallol*." Jyoti Basu, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, BT Ranadive were present at the performance. The day was called the Kallol Vijay Utsav.

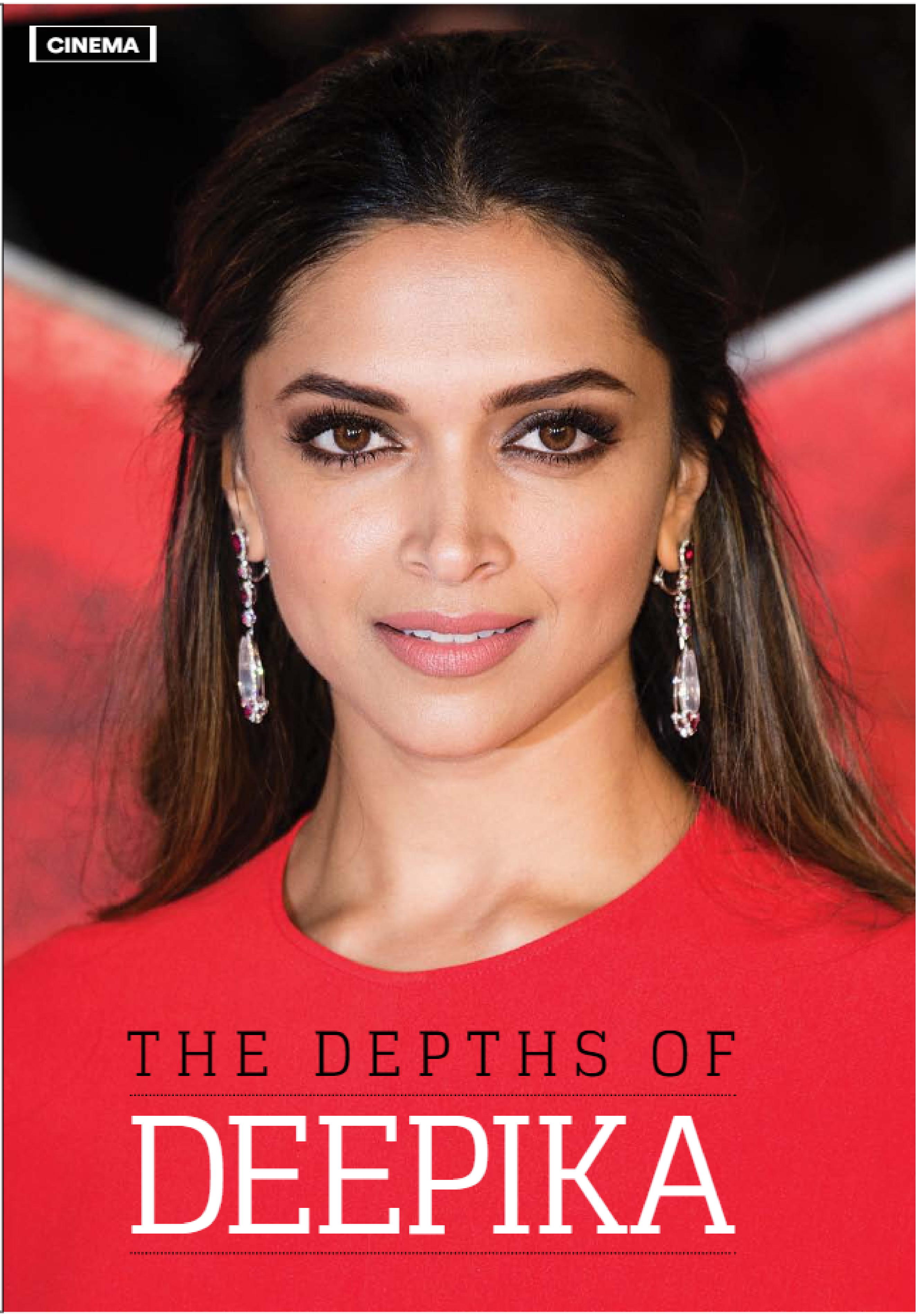
Two massive performances in the most extraordinary settings were produced after Utpal Dutt's death in 1993. An offshore set, which moved with the waves, was specially fabricated on the river Hooghly. Then in November 2005, over 50,000 people watched the play at Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata.

The stage resounded with cries of "NO SURRENDER" every time it was staged.■



Pramod Kapoor is founder-publisher of Roli Books. He is the author of Gandhi: An Illustrated Biography. *This essay draws on his new book* 1946: Last War of Independence: Royal Indian Navy Mutiny

CINEMA



THE DEPTHS OF
DEEPIKA

Photo GETTY IMAGES

Deepika Padukone is reshaping the idea of the Hindi film heroine and of the Indian woman, one movie at a time

By Kaveree Bamzai

"LOW IQ *wala baat*," mutters Amitabh Bachchan when his sister-in-law tells him she didn't accept a job because her salary would have been more than that of her husband. Piku, played by Deepika Padukone in the eponymous 2015 film, smiles.

As she should. For many women marriage defines their lives, so much so that time stops, individuality takes a backseat and freedom becomes a limiting exercise. For Padukone, it has been part of a journey of self-discovery she has been on especially since 2014, when she was diagnosed with depression. With serene fearlessness and a quiet dignity, the 36-year-old is reshaping the idea of the Hindi film heroine and of the Indian woman, one movie at a time. It is not an easy process. It is polarising, political and profoundly upsetting for status-quoists.

But clearly Padukone has learnt to embrace everything, the criticism and the praise, the bouquets and the brickbats. It isn't easy. Yes, she is a rich woman, who got where she is by dint of hard work. Yes, she is beautiful. Yes, she makes mistakes. But she is also all-too-human, whether it is questioning the focus by a national media house on her cleavage, or refusing to give into goons asking for her head for acting in *Padmaavat* (2018), or standing in solidarity with students assaulted by a mob at Jawaharlal Nehru University or choosing to play the needy and dysfunctional Alisha in Shakun Batra's dysfunctional drama, *Gehraiyaan*.

At a time when movies are choosing to either valorise women or infantilise them, it is refreshing to see a star, 15 years after she made her debut, breaking out of her gilded cage to play someone who is not an obvious heroine. Alisha is a young woman, beautiful, stuck in a relationship that is going nowhere, scarred by a misremembered childhood trauma. She meets her cousin's fiancé, a flashy neo-rich outsider who is on the make. Clearly his energy attracts her, and the affair that follows leads her into unchartered waters, literally and figuratively. "It's probably the most nuanced character I've played, so lovely, so meaty, so juicy. A lot of people have been asking me why I took this role, and I was like, 'Why would anyone say no to it?' There was so much to play and so much to have fun with. But at the same time emotionally and mentally exhausting," she says, adding "You say yes to a part and your journey as an actor begins."

Shakun Batra had offered her the part over two years ago when she was shooting in London for *83*. He flew down, narrated the story to her, she thought about it for two days, as is her wont, then said yes. A lot happened in between. The pandemic, the lockdown, the second wave, in between which they shot most of it. The movie was to be shot in Sri Lanka, it was shifted to Goa.

> " Beauty for me today is simplicity, honesty and authenticity. I feel the most beautiful when my mind and body are centred. At 21 it was about my body, how many kilos have I put on, is my make-up okay? At 36, none of that matters "
>
> DEEPIKA PADUKONE, actor

"I was living through all this with this emotional baggage that I had to hold on to because of the interruptions, and even within the film where I have to portray that I am ok when I am not ok. I found that to be the most difficult," she says. "All of those bits that are so internal, to hold on to that tension and vulnerability, ah, it's been tiring."

The film has attracted equal amounts of censure and acclaim. While many have praised its raw honesty, others have frowned upon its physical intimacy. Questions about and comments on Padukone have ranged from the cringe-worthy to plain offensive. How did Ranveer Singh, her husband, "allow" her to do such a film? Why did she accept "such" a role? What did her co-star Siddhant Chaturvedi feel about romancing the wife of his co-star from *Gully Boy*? "Why should an actor's choices change because of her personal life?" asks Padukone, adding, "What does marriage have to do with it? The intent of these questions itself is coming from the wrong place."

Padukone has been here before, when she chose to do the role of Veronica in Homi Adajania's *Cocktail* (2012), a role that has caused endless reams to be written against it by both feminists (who thought it didn't go far) and conservatives who thought it went too far. Imtiaz Ali, who wrote the film, remembers that Padukone first read for the part of the submissive and perfect-for-marriage Meera but then he suggested that she play Veronica, who was more boisterous and lively, with a lot of heart but also a lot of ferocity, and closer to her real self. The result was a woman onscreen who yearned to be loved, even to the point of wanting to change herself for her man. "Deepika's image at the time was a good, conventional Hindi film heroine of the time," says Ali, and Veronica was wild, "But because we became friends on *Love Aaj Kal* (which he directed). I could see a certain streak, which was completely unseen in Deepika. It turned out to be unique. She explored a certain side to her and we got to see a side of her that we had not previously witnessed."

Her public admission of depression was equally divisive. While she used her own expression to launch a foundation, currently run by her sister Anisha, to support those with mental health issues, it was enough to anger those who wondered what she had to be so unhappy about.

Gehraiyaan, she says, made her realise how much of our lineage we don't know but also the burden we carry forward. "I feel the film has opened up conversations for families that live like that, where so much that is brushed under the carpet, so much that is unaddressed. It's so typical of the way we function as a society. Everyone is fighting their own battles. Everyone has a story that they don't want to share for fear of being judged." Being judged didn't cross her mind, she says.

Amrita Satapathy, who teaches English at IIT Bhubaneswar, and is interested in popular culture, says that Padukone has redefined and expanded the idea of womanhood in Bollywood. "We saw her at the start of her career portraying two diametrically opposite sides of a struggling '70s actor, Shanti and her doppelganger Sandhya (Sandy) in *Om Shanti Om* (2007).This movie and Deepika's effortless essaying of two diversely different women can be said to be the beginning of the pragmatic, intelligent, self-reliant, thinking woman eschewing a very modern yet democratic worldview in Hindi movies," says Satapathy. It was no surprise that she has been earning a living by modelling since the age of 18. Daughter of badminton legend Prakash Padukone and his travel agent wife Ujjala, she is close to her family and proud of what she has achieved through her own hard work.

She has grown up in front of us, from the long-limbed model of the Kingfisher Calendar to the *Om Shanti Om* girl to the representative of the Gen Y woman who scripts her journey and re-tells her story in her voice, adds Satapathy. From the smart taxi driver in Sydney, Gayatri in *Bachna Ae Haseeno* (2008) to the balanced yet shy wallflower Naina in *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013); from the nonconformist art restorer Meera Pandit in *Love Aaj Kal* (2009) to the supportive and kind girlfriend in *Karthik Calling Karthik* (2010); from the visually impaired skater in *Lafangey Parindey* (2010) to the free-spirited party animal in *Cocktail*. But it is her portrayals of the sensible yet smart village belle Meena in *Chennai Express* (2013) and her Gujarati avatar of Shakespeare's Juliet in *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013), that took the idea of womanhood in Bollywood to a whole new level. The idea of a stable, autonomous, standardised 'heroine' or woman for that matter is no longer relevant, is something that her Meena and Leela proved, says Satapathy.

Piku Banerjee only established this new woman further, managing the household chores, a cantankerous and constipated father, a confused house-help and her professional life in *Piku*. Piku's writer Juhi Chaturvedi says, "The journey of an entire film is a long one. Actors are the last to join it. When Deepika came on board, I had already completed the script of this cantankerous father-daughter duo. Shoojit, in his mind, had already shot it and her saying yes to the idea meant that she believed in his vision completely, and would give her all, in a way as if it originated from her in the first place. If you understand the emotional investment that an actor has to make in such a short span, it is huge. Working alongside Mr Bachchan and Irrfan, picking from their tender creative energy, feeding them with hers, and all in such a palpable way that there is no room for '*performance*' because it has to look real but in the form of pure art, and that isn't an easy ask. Deepika identified with her character Piku, instantly."

DEEPIKA PADUKONE IN *GEHRAIYAAN*

But that didn't mean she had to play herself, adds Chaturvedi. It meant that her understanding of an ageing father, of an only child, of the limitations that nuclear families bring, of the desires of a young woman desperately seeking some respite from the weight of responsibilities sapping her youth matched the same depth as Shoojit Sircar, and now she was supposed to live in that place for as long as it took to bring out the truth of the Banerjee family in the most soulful way.

With Alisha in *Gehraiyaan*, Deepika goes from the good Indian daughter to an angst-ridden millennial woman caught in a moral quandary, searching for happiness, getting a grip on her childhood

> "I feel the film has opened up conversations for families, where so much is brushed under the carpet, so much that is unaddressed. It's so typical of the way we function as a society. Everyone is fighting their own battles. Everyone has a story that they don't want to share for fear of being judged"
>
> DEEPIKA PADUKONE

trauma and navigating fractured relationships. The world though would like to project the conventional heroine on her, which doesn't do justice to her instinct, intellect or athleticism, says director Rohan Sippy who got her to do the electric song in *Dum Maaro Dum* (2011).

Where does this new, refreshed Deepika go from here? She has a mix of movies, the tentpole *Pathan* with Shah Rukh Khan and John Abraham; a movie with Telugu superstar Prabhas; the Hindi version of *The Intern* with Amitabh Bachchan; and *Fighter* with Hrithik Roshan. "I worked hard to get to a place where I have the luxury of doing all of it. I can do a Rohit Shetty film, a Shoojit Sircar film, an Ayan Mukherjee film, or a Sanjay Leela Bhansali film. I'm just relying on my gut," she says. There was a time when she didn't listen to her heart, she says. "I was probably swayed by a big name or just the idea of a film." She's referring to the period after her debut in 2007 and *Cocktail*. "That was a point in my life when I was so ready to let go of my inhibitions and the expectations of what a heroine is supposed to be. In a lot of ways people think I fall into that mould, but that is not in my control."

She says Imtiaz Ali had a big role to play in the transformation and from there on the floodgates opened. She is enjoying herself the older she gets. "The experiences have shaped me and helped me become the person I am today. My definition of beauty has changed. Growing up you're conditioned to believe in beauty as a certain stereotypical physicality. I've also been a victim of that. I've bought into that ideology. As I've grown and evolved, beauty for me today is simplicity, honesty and authenticity. I feel the most beautiful when my mind and body are centred. At 21 it was about my body, how many kilos have I put on, is my make-up okay? At 36, none of that matters."

The pandemic has taken a toll on her, for her the fragility of life came home in 2014 when she woke up feeling she didn't want to live anymore. "That was a life-altering moment for me. The journey for me now is of authenticity, honesty and living my truth. If I have to bear the consequences, so be it," she says. Whether it is speaking up against #MeToo directors during her stint as chairperson of the Mumbai Academy of the Moving Image or taking time out to shoot a video for a fan, it's Deepika, uncut, unfiltered, unafraid. ■

Theatre of the Everyday

S Hareesh's short stories highlight his ability to work in the epic and mundane mode at the same time

By Jai Arjun Singh

AMONG THE MANY electric passages in *Adam*, a collection of stories by the Malayali writer S Hareesh (translated from Malayalam by Jayasree Kalathil; Vintage; 179 pages; ₹499), my favourite came at the end, in a tale called 'Night Watch'. An old man has died and his long-time enemy has come straight to the house, apparently to help with the last rites but also to gaze upon the dead body with some satisfaction. Soon after this we are told of a public confrontation between the two adversaries a week earlier—a verbal battle that grew to seemingly apocalyptic dimensions, with abuses so rich and profound that the story's narrator can't even specify what they are.

"Sankunniyaasan uttered a phrase that annihilated all moral values in the collective mind of the audience," we learn—and then "Madhavan delivered a response that could not have been possible even in the farthest reaches of a nightmare."

Breathtaking in its playfulness and intensity, this passage shows a distinct aspect of Hareesh's work—the ability to work in the epic mode and the realistic or mundane one at the same time. As the episode builds, one thinks of warriors in ancient literature—say, Bhishma and Parashurama in the Mahabharata—assailing each other with world-destroying weapons like the Brahmastra. ("They began with a few choice but ordinary words, but the sparks from these spread until a forest fire of larger and meatier words blazed [...] the enemies turned into wizards who conjured up new and imaginative obscenities, slicing and splicing existing ones.") And yet, one never forgets that this is a real setting involving two aged, *mundu*-clad men who have just participated (without speaking to each other) in a card game behind a paan shop.

Somehow the much-used descriptor "magic realism" doesn't seem an adequate description of this effect; the events being described in most of these stories aren't mystical or otherworldly (with one or two *possible* exceptions), but the nature of the telling creates that impression. Or maybe something about the setting lends itself to poetic exaggeration.

There are unexpectedly funny little moments in all the stories. In 'Kavyamela', when a blind man revisits a large rock off which he had once fallen, we are told that he "walked up to the rock and sat on it as if in vengeance". Dogs in heat are described as flirting or canoodling with each other. Though death is a theme that runs through this book, the treatment can be simultaneously comic and tragic. For instance, in 'Magic Tail', a young woman has to transport her

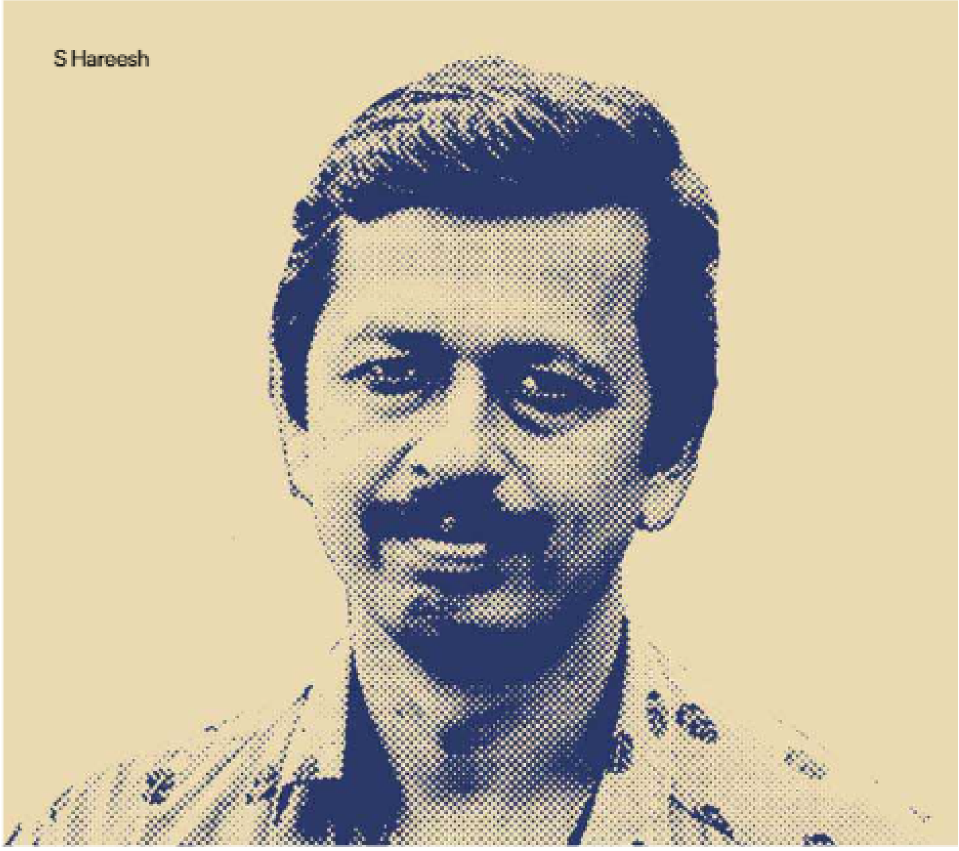
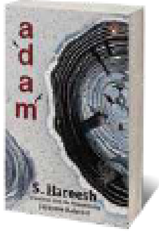


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

father's dead body a long way home; it's a sad occasion and her grief is genuine, but somehow, in an intriguingly matter-of-fact way, the journey also becomes an occasion for sexual banter—and possibly more—between her and the acquaintance who is driving her (in a Maruti Omni converted into a hearse).

Elsewhere, an ambiguity surrounds the very nature of death. "I've finally defeated you," thinks Sankunniyaasan, looking at Madhavan's corpse in 'Night Watch'—but is there more to come? Will they continue their eternal battle in the afterlife? Two of the most haunting stories in this collection imply a blurring of the line between living and not-living. In 'Alone', a man on his way home from work gets off the bus and finds himself on a dark, deserted path, not sure of the direction he must walk in—and soon realises that the reason for his fear and dislocation is that it is the first time he has been completely alone. This strange, compelling tale is open to interpretation—perhaps what is being described is the loneliness of the afterlife. ("What if, in other places, the sun had risen several times? What if this place would never again see the light of day? What if eons had gone by since his wife and children had stopped crying for him?") A similar tone is achieved in 'Death Notice', which describes the deaths of non-human creatures—a cow dies after a childbirth gone badly wrong, new-born puppies are destroyed, a turtle is caught and cooked—and then gives us two men playing a macabre game involving newspaper obituaries, before a final twist in the tale.

Then there are the two longest pieces, 'Maoist' and the title story 'Adam', both of which centre on animals but are about the intersection of many worlds: human and canine, human and bovine, and of course the divides and conflicts within our species. 'Adam' can loosely be summarised as a story about four puppies from the same litter, each living out a different destiny, but that wouldn't begin to convey the full scope of this tale. One pup, who becomes Victor, ends up working as a police dog, the pride of the force for years—though even this doesn't preclude a sad end. Another, Candy, leads a comfortable life until her master gets married to someone who doesn't like dogs. Yet another, Arthur, gets a new name after being kidnapped. Their circumstances change over time, and the narrative takes the shape of vignettes, one flowing into the next, as if the narrator is a celestial bookkeeper recounting the highlights of various lives. In another writer's hands it would seem like the animals are being used only as metaphors for human struggles, but that isn't the case here—the dogs are dogs, what happens to them feels organic and truthful, and in any case we are also privy to the stories and shifting fortunes of the actual humans in the story.



The much-used descriptor 'magic realism' doesn't seem an adequate description of S Hareesh's stories; the events being described in most of them aren't mystical or otherworldly (with one or two *possible* exceptions), but the nature of the telling creates that impression

A similar effect is achieved in the brilliant 'Maoist', perhaps the most well-known story here, being the seed of the acclaimed 2019 film *Jallikattu* (which was scripted by Hareesh and selected as India's entry to the Oscars). 'Maoist' uses the framing device of two runaway buffaloes for a funny, hard-hitting sociological study of a village and its class politics. As the hunt gathers pace, we meet characters who represent different hierarchies and types. The family of Varky the butcher has the nickname 'Kaalan' not because Kaalan, the God of Death, rides on a buffalo, but because of the clan's extraordinarily long legs (or "*kaalu*"), which makes them instantly identifiable. The politics of meat-eating and packaging are revealed (local dignitaries get meat that has been cut into fine, neat pieces; lesser customers get carelessly hacked "seconds".) From landowners to rowdies to Communists, everyone is affected. A young man posts a video of the buffalo chase on Facebook, leading to "shares" and astonished comments from around the world.

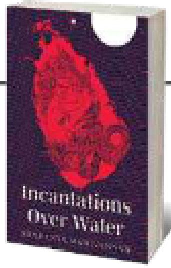
Here again, Hareesh's prose often operates in a grand meter without losing sight of the everyday: a passage about how the pursuit causes ebbs and flows in different people's destinies begins with the showy line, "Presently, as though ordained by God himself, the land witnessed the complete fall from grace of two of its prominent personages..." To watch *Jallikattu* after reading this story is to marvel at how these thirty-odd pages can create such an elaborate universe, within the borders of a small Keralite village—while *also* spawning a visually striking film that has long silent passages.

Reading Hareesh's novel *Moustache* (originally *Meesha*; also translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil) a couple of years ago, I loved the scope and ambition of the narrative, but also felt it was too exhausting to take in all at once; that it may have worked better as a collection of linked but standalone short stories. The stories in *Adam* suggest that Hareesh is in his element in the short-story format. These rich, imaginative tales need more than one reading to fully process the ways in which they blur the line not just between humans and other forces of nature, but also between life and death, dreaming and wakefulness. ■

The Magic of Mermaids

Sharanya Manivannan uses fantastical elements to talk about Sri Lanka's trauma

By Tasneem Pocketwala

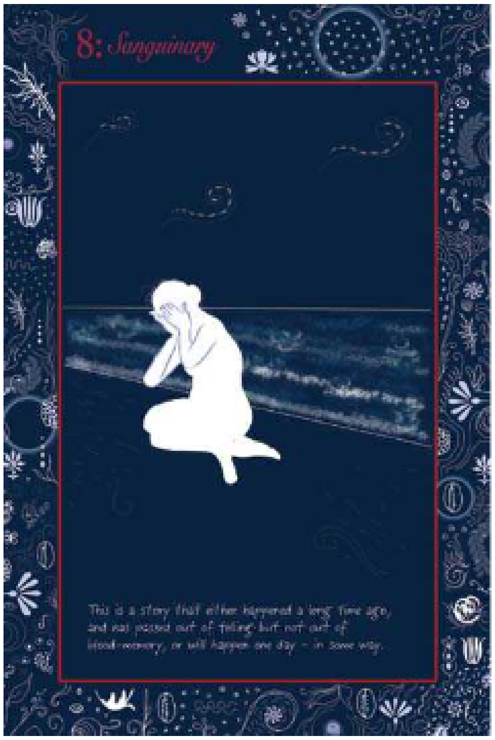


INCANTATIONS OVER WATER
Sharanya Manivannan

Context
176 Pages | ₹799

IT IS NOT often that we open a graphic novel about mermaids and witness stunning lyricism leaping off its pages.

Sharanya Manivannan's gorgeously illustrated, evocative novel *Incantations over Water* weaves a tapestry of lore, mythology, magic, and history featuring mermaids, those fantastical sea-based creatures we tend to assume sprang from European imagination alone. Except that in Manivannan's rendition, they seem less fantastical, more victims of anthropocentricism taken to an extreme, and existent across mythologies. As Ila, our protagonist and storyteller, berates us, "You, humans, you like the stories in which one of you meets one of us. This is why you don't really know the stories of us."



This is a story that either happened a long time ago, and was passed out of telling but not out of blood-memory, or will happen one day – in some way.

An illustration from *Incantations Over Water* by Sharanya Manivannan

Ila is a mermaid residing in the Kallady lagoon in Mattakalappu (or Batticaloa), Sri Lanka, who lures the reader with tales about merfolk and the history of her home. In interviews, Manivannan talks about how when she visited Mattakalappu, her ancestral home, she noticed mermaids appearing everywhere but in folklore. Elsewhere, Manivannan writes, "the *meen magal* [mermaid] was just there, in symbols and songs"; just not in narratives.

Acknowledging this "folkloric void", Manivannan works by pulling out story threads from the world's tapestry of mermaid lore. While telling us about herself, Ila borrows stories—seeking them "like the moon seeks itself in still water"—from Southeast Asia to South America, trying "to find myself in them".

The sea appears as a character in the novel, almost a living being with a force of its own, opening its "maw" and swallowing all that is near it on land. Its depths filled with a wondrous universe brimming with life, the sea is also half home to Ila, whose other home is Batticaloa and the connection she feels to it after having witnessed so much history and loss on its land. Even as Manivannan has Ila narrate her story through all the lacunae, she uses these fantastical elements to talk about grief, loss, and trauma that Sri Lanka itself has undergone in the course of its history of colonialism, Civil War, and the tsunami. For the larger part of the novel, Ila tells us about herself (through the stories of other mermaids like her) and her land. But it is only towards the end that we get a glimpse of her own longing and yearning to be seen, to be heard, to not be alone. To be heard is to have one's existence acknowledged. When Ila asks to be heard, she is essentially asking to be realised, storied, contextualised.

In many instances, Manivannan depicts the sea and the night sky as reflections of each other. Ila calls a boatman "another beautiful bearer of light"; the boat has an "asterism" within it; corals "orbed" around Ila's wrists. Deep indigo has been used as the major colour palette, on which drawings are then depicted in white alongside contrasts of vivid colours, mostly reds and yellows. The overall effect is that of being enticed into a magical world of deep waters under a mystical night sky.

The language is beautiful and suffused with imagery. A diver "rides up through the water like a sun-seeking thing". Ila implies stories about "the power-hungry and the poetry-impelled" projecting their desire for glory onto other places. A wrecked and lost ship takes on "transformed sentience" in the form of lush reefs.

Sometimes though, Manivannan can be a tad bit too generous in her use of nautical words. It would also help tremendously if there was an appendix giving context to the many mermaid folklore mentioned in the novel. Having to look them up online steals from the experience, and breaks the narrative flow for the reader.

Split into 12 chapters, *Incantations over Water* is an exploration about memory, home, loss, and the power of narratives. Densely researched and ecofeminist in its approach, the novel is an enthralling poetic and visual feat. ■

City Watching

Tales of aspirations and losses

By Karthik Keramalu

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

ANNIE ZAIDI'S *CITY of Incident* is a small novel that you can devour easily in less than two hours. But you shouldn't be fooled by its petiteness, for it plumbs the psyches of a metropolis's inhabitants diligently, thereby making up for what it might lack in volume. So stretch your time out when you pick this book up because you'll be in for a literary ride. Zaidi comes up with a dozen short tales and strings them together by shifting the points of view. This method allows the protagonist of one chapter to appear as a supporting character in another.

In a way, *City of Incident* captures the aspirations and losses of a bunch of people irrespective of their socio-economic status—there's a trinket seller, a bank employee, a policeman, a security guard, etcetera. Most of them are unhappy in their own ways, some more than the other. As an author, Zaidi doesn't provide her characters with many dialogues. She sets the stage simply by establishing the scene and ruminates on the peripheries that carry it forward. When the dialogues do show up, they are crisp and to the point.

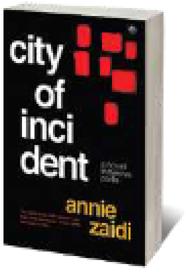
Although each story is just around 10-15 pages long, Zaidi makes you feel that you've lurked among the sentences for longer than usual. The rhythm of the calculatingly serious prose is broken at intervals by the inclusion of humorous anecdotes such as, "The secret joke among the staff at her branch is that the sweetness of the scent and brilliance of the flowers in her hair stand in inverse proportion to the sourness of her tongue and the blackness of her mood."

Zaidi sometimes stalls the plot by unfolding a particular scene again and again. Perhaps it's the only way to make her readers register that everything's happening in the same metropolis, where familiar faces pop up at every turn, but heartfelt hellos seldom do. Who has the luxury of doing a stop-and-chat anyway when there are trains to catch, the same trains where there are no places to sit, or stand?

While the stories of men are constructed somewhat lethargically, there's a certain amount of shared weightlifting done by women here that's profound and sad in equal measure. Take the bit about the housewife, for example, who "steals" a few extra minutes between 7.45 and 8 am to tussle with her thoughts alone before she has to get back to her husband and in-laws to serve them breakfast. Or another bit where a woman reminds her mother-in-law that the television set came to the house as part of her dowry. After all, when young women stand up for what they feel is right, patriarchy seems to shiver.

These are a little like the pieces of gossip that you pick up from your neighbourhood, but in Zaidi's hands, they acquire a rich colour of their own. The final chapter, which has a romantic flavour, opens up smoothly, almost invisibly, by centring on a woman and a man who live on different floors of a high-rise. This one is pure in its form and gets all the emotions right—from curiosity to hesitation and then to the web of thoughts surrounding the sacred act of making the next move in a blossoming relationship. Over a cup of tea, the man navigates the conversation, hoping she'll keep the silences at bay. If not a love story, it can be seen as the beginning of a fruitful friendship at least.

The characters in a *City of Incident* are left unnamed probably to make them sound universal. Or maybe the names really don't matter. What matters, nevertheless, is Zaidi's undying zest for pouring life into a set of characters whose power relies upon being omnipresent and yet whose tribulations go unheard. ■



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Team Bollywood

Bollywood is undergoing a seismic shift. The old doesn't seem to be working as it used to, and the new is confused and confounded. I talked to Siddharth Roy Kapur of Roy Kapur Films and Rohan Sippy of Ramesh Sippy Entertainment to understand the top trends:

• Collaborations seem the order of the day in Bollywood: Somebody gets the idea, someone else executes it. The audio-visual medium is a collaborative medium, says Roy Kapur, and if you want to do many things simultaneously, then you have to work as a team. So, in the case of SonyLIV's magnificent *Rocket Boys*, the idea came to Roy Kapur Films from a writer, Abhay Koranne (who wrote *Bhavesh Joshi Superhero*, 2018) and then Roy Kapur took it to Nikkhil Advani, who has made a series of stunning shows, *The Empire* (2021), and *Mumbai Diaries 26/11* (2021). Ditto for the moody and atmospheric *Aranyak* (2021) on Netflix, where Roy Kapur joined hands with Ramesh Sippy Entertainment. On Disney+Hotstar's *Human*, Vipul Amrutlal Shah was working on a story about clinical trials which didn't quite cut it. He then asked Mozez Singh to come on board. They both co-produced and co-directed the series. More minds, more hands, more scale.

• Keeping doors open to great new writers: Their minds are not jaded by multiple years of pitches. "You never know where an idea can come from," says Roy Kapur who has many young people working with him now—including Abhay Koranne.

• The mode of exhibition has been transformed: Earlier the kind of stories being told were limited by duration and the commercial construct of the marketplace. One had to be specific about the genres and the stories one could tell. The revenue model has changed now. So, theatrical audiences can watch larger-than-life superhero big-ticket movies, while streaming audiences can focus on longer-form storytelling.

• Landscapes are changing: *Mithya*, Zee5's new series based on the British show *Cheat* has been shot entirely in Darjeeling, with St Paul's standing in for the university where it is based—viewers will remember it as the 2004 film, *Main Hoon Na*'s school. Shot after the West Bengal elections last year, the show benefits from the monsoon which hit the area, making it difficult to shoot, but adding to the atmospherics. Sippy, who shot *Mithya*, is an old hand at making the place the star of the show/film, from Goa in *Dum Maaro Dum* (2011) to Himachal Pradesh in *Aranyak*.

• Everyone wants it now: The hunger for "content" is so intense that writers are working overtime to turn in shows. The turnaround time is shrinking and the story often is not served as well as it should. But at least writers are getting credit upfront for their work, whether it is Kanika Dhillon for *Haseen Dillruba* (2021) or Mrunmayee Lagoo Waikul for the forthcoming *Scoop*, based on journalist Jigna Vora.

• Diversity is the key: Transgender love affairs. Lavender marriages. Depression. Bipolar disorder. Bollywood is embracing diversity as never before. As the south goes back to its conventional roots, Bollywood is swimming against the tide. Will it be successful? No one wants to be vanilla anymore.

Scene That

Nikesh Patel is slowly climbing the heartthrob status in England with every single woman's favourite romantic lead. After *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (2019), the TV series, he was Tom Kapoor, the film star, in New Zealand actor Rose Matafeo's *Starstruck* (2021). With the return of Season 2, his Kapoor becomes ever more charming, especially when the scene shifts to his parents' home where they are seen as typically over-achieving Indians who are disappointed their son didn't choose medicine over being a globally famous movie star. This is how diversity works. What began as a conscious effort to promote diversity in the early years of British television, with roles being created for pioneering Indian actors such as Zohra Sehgal and Saeed Jaffrey, has now become a natural phenomenon. It's something Hollywood could learn, too, as it struggles with racism and sexism, which it tries desperately to correct at Oscar time. The growing number of Blacks and women among the nominees is recognition of this shift, but there needs to be less tokenism and more total revolution. ■

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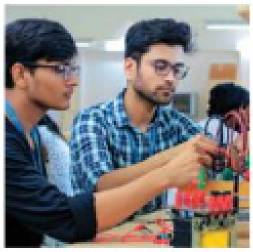

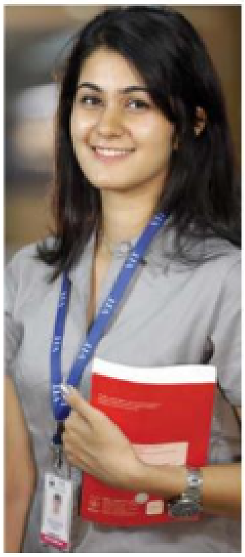

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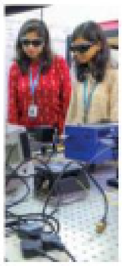

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